

259, 279 and 349 bus routes proposed changes – London TravelWatch’s response

London TravelWatch is London’s independent transport watchdog, using evidence to campaign to improve journeys, and advocate for all people travelling in London.

It is in this role that we are responding to TfL’s consultation about the proposed changes to routes 259, 279 and 349.

If these proposals proceed as planned the 259 would be restructured to run further north to Ponders End, and reduce the southern section of the route to terminate at Holloway, Nag’s Head. The 349 would be withdrawn entirely to reduce duplication of other routes, while the 279 would be restructured to run to Stamford Hill instead of Manor House Station.

We have the following comments:

Simplifying and rationalising the bus network

TfL note that these proposals aim to remove underused services and duplicated routes, and introduce new journey options. London TravelWatch understands the principle of reviewing the bus network and adapting as needed to make the most effective use of its resources, redirecting them where most needed.

Given this, we understand the reasoning for withdrawing the 349, which for the bulk of the route duplicates other services in this area. Simplifying the network may make it easier for people to understand and navigate, and with the re-routing of the 279 links currently provided by the 349 between Ponders End and Stamford Hill would be maintained.

Matching demand

Part of the rationale for these proposals is to better match capacity to demand to address apparent surplus capacity issues. While we understand this requirement, as these proposals focus on route structure rather than frequency it is hard to comment on whether the proposals are reasonable, or risk reducing capacity to a level that is detrimental to passengers.

We note that TfL will review service levels as part of the implementation process to ensure that capacity meets demand, especially on revised routes 259 and 279. However, as it stands, we are concerned about capacity issues along busy key corridors served by these routes, for example the key stretch between Manor House and Seven Sisters where the frequency of buses would be more than halved. We also question if there is sufficient supply to meet demand on the remaining services (routes 17 and 91) south of Holloway.

If supply is not well matched to demand, higher occupancy on buses can have create a poorer travelling environment for passengers if there are fewer available seats and more crowding. This is particularly detrimental for disabled people and those who require a seat.

New and broken links

We positively note the proposed changes would improve connectivity for some passengers, with new direct links between areas such as Ponders End, Holloway and Stamford Hill. For people travelling between these locations, they would likely experience quicker journey times and no longer need to change buses.

However, we are concerned that these benefits will be outweighed by the number of broken links created by the changes. The EqIA estimates that 3,456 daily trips could no longer be undertaken on a direct bus journey, with passengers having to change buses or add an additional pedestrian route. While the number of broken links on the 349 and 279 are relatively low (46 and 528 respectively, representing 0.4% and 1.8% of total trips), 259 passengers are much more likely to be negatively impacted.

Ending the southern section of the 259 at Holloway instead of King's Cross will create a significant number of broken links, with the EqIA estimating that nearly 1 in 5 (18%) of daily trips will be broken – 2,883 each day. This would create significant inconvenience and increased journey times for passengers. More generally, by not continuing the 259 to King's Cross (cutting off the part of the route containing many people's destinations) we are concerned it may decrease the desirability of using the bus at all, at a time when bus use should be encouraged. While we understand the need to rationalise the network, it is still important buses take people where they want to go.

The impact of broken journeys

London TravelWatch knows that passengers don't like changing buses. Time spent doing it is involuntary because having to change is always second best to using a direct service. Changing buses adds extra time to a journey and an uncertainty of timing of the journey. Changing buses can also potentially mean an additional cost for passengers if they go outside of the 60-minute Hopper fare window while waiting for their second bus.

Interchange can also be inconvenient and stressful, especially for passengers such as older and Disabled passengers or those with children or luggage, who choose the bus because it is more accessible and easier for them to use. This is particularly of concern as the proposals could also reduce access to medical and disability centres, as noted in the EqIA.

Safety concerns

Passengers can be concerned for their safety whilst waiting at bus stops, especially before dawn and after dusk, when perpetrators of crime have the benefit of dark streets and fewer bystanders. People don't want to be alone for an extended period as it can feel it invites opportunities for people to take advantage when no one else is

around. We know this is particularly a concern for some passengers, for example women and girls.

Interchange locations

Given the above, it is critical that changing between buses is as seamless as possible. TfL say that it is working to reduce the impact of having to change buses by planning the network so passengers can easily transfer between services.

We note that same-stop interchange will be available at many stops on journeys that will require a change under the proposals, most of which have a shelter with seating, and some of which have a Countdown sign to provide real-time bus arrival information. These are positive features, which we would ask TfL to make sure are available at all stops where possible.

Where same-stop interchange is not possible, it is important that the journey between stops is easy and accessible, including making sure pavements are good quality, there is street lighting and sufficient wayfinding signage. As such we have some reservations about the interchange for passengers travelling southbound changing from the 259 to the 17 or 91. While Stop X “Caledonian Road”, where passengers would wait while changing, has a shelter with seating and the pavement is free from street furniture, the journey to it from Stop V involves crossing two roads. While Caledonian Road has a signalised pedestrian crossing, Biddestone Road only has a lowered kerb with tactile crossing, no signalised crossing. While TfL note the road has relatively light traffic, we would welcome assurances from TfL that the crossing is suitably safe and ask if installing a signalised crossing has been considered.

Conclusion

Taking all matters into consideration, London TravelWatch has significant concerns about these proposals, particularly the shortening of the 259 to Holloway and wider capacity issues on busy parts of the routes.

When these proposals were originally consulted on in 2022 we objected for similar reasons. While we recognise that passenger numbers have fallen since then, strengthening the case to match service to demand, the issue of broken links on the 259 remains substantial. Additionally, without being able to see more concrete plans on the frequency of services questions remain about if supply will be sufficient.

However, if TfL do decide to proceed with this proposal, we call on them to focus on the following:

Monitoring and evaluation

We note TfL’s statement that “passenger loading surveys would be undertaken on all affected routes to confirm that the right level of service is being provided and that there are no crowded services”, and that capacity and reliability would be reviewed on an ongoing basis. We welcome this continued monitoring, and would ask TfL to be ready to take swift action if needed to address any issues as they arise.

Reinvesting savings

TfL say that they “continuously review and adapt the bus network to reflect changing customer needs”, including changes to make sure services operate in areas where people need them most. While we understand the logic behind this, it is important to put these resources back into the network, and be transparent about where they have been redirected to.

Publicising the route changes

TfL will need to ensure that there is clear information about the changes online and in-person, including at all current bus stops for routes 259, 279 and 349. We also support plans to provide detailed maps, journey planning tools and travel mentoring to help passengers understand the changes, and adapt journeys as needed.