

Bus Users UK response to the London Assembly Transport Committee Call for Evidence: Bus Network in London

July 2022

1. Is the bus network in London currently fit for purpose?

London's bus network is extensive and regular enough on many daytime routes that passengers often don't need to check timetables before travelling. This is much envied across the rest of the UK. Late in the evening and overnight, however, services are far less frequent and often follow a different route to their daytime counterparts, which is confusing and a deterrent to travel.

2. To what extent are bus services in London inclusive and accessible? What, if anything, can be done to improve this?

Current vehicle designs are outdated. They need to be upgraded as soon as is viable to include flexible wheelchair spaces enabling more than one wheelchair user to travel at the same time. Many other bus operators in the UK have vehicles with 2 wheelchair spaces which reduces the fear of not being able to travel, as well as the tension between wheelchair users and other passengers with buggies or luggage.

Drivers often do not pull into the kerb, even when there is space to do so, which makes life difficult for people who are less able to step down and up easily.

Inconsiderate parking around or in bus stops also needs to be addressed, with 'bounty' schemes for towing companies to remove any offending vehicles. Likewise, pavement parking is rarely confronted, despite it being widespread across London. Many boroughs allow partial or whole car parking on pavement without any white line guidance as to where the vehicle should be (eg LB Bromley) which removes access for many pedestrians trying to use more sustainable forms of travel.

An accessible and inclusive bus network relies on accessible and inclusive infrastructure. Many bus stops offer no seating, shelter or useful information making them unappealing, even unusable.

New plans to introduce external screens on buses are useful but also need audio options. The TfL plan to increase by 5% the number of bus routes which require passengers to change to another service will disproportionately affect elderly, disabled and learning-disabled people and reduce confidence in the bus as a viable option.

Disability Assistance (not just awareness) training for staff, especially drivers, will be critical in making them more confident in assisting passengers. This is a requirement under the 2019

Regulation on Rights of Passengers in Bus and Coach but levels of compliance are poor. London should lead the way on this.

Electric wheelchair ramps are very prone to fail and several major bus operators, such as Go Ahead, have started to replace these with manual ramps as they are more reliable, though clearly require drivers to deploy them. This should be investigated to remove the insecurity of wheelchair users about whether they can get on and off the vehicle safely.

3. What are the most critical safety and security concerns on the bus network? What more can be done to improve safety and security on the bus network?

Reducing the need for long waits at inadequate bus stops is critical – seating is vital for people who cannot stand for even short periods.

The current trend in South London of removing Countdown screens is unhelpful. It requires people with smartphones to use them at bus stops making them a possible target for crime and it disadvantages those without digital access.

Access to buses can be impeded by schemes like bus bypasses, which are poorly understood by pedestrians and cyclists. Despite evidence that the rate of accidents is lower than imagined, crossing a cycle path to board a bus is a barrier for many otherwise confident travellers. This is especially the case where the seating, shelter and information is on one side of the cycle path and the actual bus flag and stopping point is on the other (see Park Lane northbound).

Lighting at bus stops is also inconsistent, which can cause concern for people who have to wait for any length of time.

Once on the bus, it is critical that announcements are loud enough to be heard by the majority of passengers.

A police/problem reporting tool for bus passengers similar to the British Transport Police text 61016 for train passengers should be developed and promoted. A Safety Partnership such as that used in the West Midlands would inspire more confidence in passengers and drivers that concerns will be addressed in a timely fashion.

4. How well are particular demographic or social groups in London consulted on network changes?

Some groups are consulted but more effort should be expended to engage with those who are not.

Most consultations rely on spokespeople and stakeholders having access to digital media which excludes 16% of the adult population. Only 35% of people over 65 have a smartphone. Digital exclusion often goes hand-in-hand with financial exclusion and those groups will naturally tend to be the ones most dependent on buses. Disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people and so could end up doubly disadvantaged and excluded from consultations which affect them.

Consultations lasting a month or 6 weeks are too short for many people who do not have easy access to the digital world.

Printed consultation questionnaires could be distributed on buses, possibly within the Metro newspaper. They should also be available from libraries, colleges and schools, promoted in local free papers and on local radio.

London can and must do better if sufficient numbers of people are to be persuaded away from private cars towards more sustainable travel.

5. Does TfL's Bus Action Plan from March 2022, address the key challenges of the Bus network in London? How will it help to improve London's bus services?

It is encouraging to see a plan recognising the vital role of the bus in our society although it is a mistake to treat bus and active travel as somehow separate. Travel by bus is active travel given the need to get to and between stops and onto different modes.

While encouraging people to use more sustainable transport is clearly a good thing, it will be ineffective unless private car use is made less convenient. This is politically sensitive but measures are needed to make bus travel the more attractive option. Buses should be faster than private cars so redirecting private traffic, Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, 20 mph limits on roads, increased parking costs and higher private car permit costs are needed, especially in areas where congestion affects the smooth running of buses. Making life easier for people using sustainable modes and harder for private motorists will nudge those who are not moved by the environmental, economic, health and social arguments in favour of buses.

For the 4% of Londoners who don't have an easy walk to a bus stop, shared transport clubs, Direct Responsive Transport and Community Transport options should all be supported and prioritised in the same way, along with cargo bikes at supermarkets for those who keep a car simply to do a 'big shop' once a week or month.

Confidence in journey reliability is the top priority for most passengers. Priority measures (not just bus lanes) are critical to ensure that passengers' needs are served. Congestion affects all parts of London and South East London is no exception. It is, however, rarely treated as a priority and this plan is no different in that respect. LB Lewisham is a good example. It experiences chronic traffic congestion on all routes, despite extensive traffic management infrastructure changes which are poorly signposted and confusing to the majority of private car users, creating chaos and clogging exits during busy periods.

6. What will be the impact on your life, or the people you represent, if cuts in routes or frequencies are made to the bus services you depend upon?

We all know the economic, environmental and social benefits of bus and the critical role they play in allowing us to get on with our lives. Transport poverty creates inequality and reduces access to opportunities through education, training and work. Social isolation is as harmful to health as smoking and the costs associated with social isolation far outweigh the cost of a bus route. For many people buses are a lifeline and what they want is more, not fewer services not just for their own sake but for the good of society as a whole.

Frequency changes are also concerning and should be explained well in advance, on the routes concerned, and on posters and announcements not just online and via apps.

People who are neurodivergent, blind or partially sighted for example, will often learn their routes to school, college or work and changes can be disruptive and distressing.

Routes being split which involves a change of vehicle or even a requirement to move to a different stop have extensive impacts on people with restricted mobility, sensory impairments or other disabilities. It's more than simple inconvenience - for many it can be catastrophic. For a wheelchair user in particular, the concern that there will not be a wheelchair space free on the next service carries the real threat of being stranded part-way through a journey.

Reduced frequency services also increase the likelihood of over-crowding, making them less accessible to the people who rely on them, and less attractive to private car users thereby reducing the opportunity for modal shift.

Confidence in public transport is hard-earned but easily lost.

About Bus Users

Bus Users is a charity that campaigns for inclusive, accessible transport. We are the only approved Alternative Dispute Resolution Body for the bus and coach industry and the designated body for handling complaints under the Passenger Rights in Bus and Coach Legislation. We are also part of a Sustainable Transport Alliance, a group working to promote the benefits of public, shared and active travel.

Alongside our complaints work we investigate and monitor services and work with operators and transport providers to improve services for everyone. We run events, carry out research, respond to consultations, speak at government select committees and take part in industry events to make sure the voice of the passenger is heard.

Bus Users UK Charitable Trust Ltd is a registered charity (1178677 and SC049144) and a Company Limited by Guarantee (04635458).

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