

TRANSPORT BUSES ⌚ June 17, 2019

## Transport for London just cut its bus services. You probably didn't notice.

By [Steve Chambers](#)



A number 12 bus crosses Westminster Bridge. Image: Getty.

One of the biggest changes to London's buses happened on Sunday 16 June – although Londoners won't have realised the full implications until the following morning, when they tried to go about their morning commutes. Then, they might have been surprised and angered with how inconvenient the service has become.

Transport for London has a strategic plan to cut the total length of routes it operates every year to 2022, and then to start increasing them again. The idea is that, by 2024, services in inner London will have fallen, and services in outer London will go up.

The Central London bus changes are part of the Inner London cuts part of the plan. Transport for London says bus use is dropping, and the changes reflect demand. But if you take a closer look at the changes, they don't make sense when you consider what people use Central London buses for.

The basic difference between inner and outer London routes is that the inner routes, as well as interchanging with tube and train for the last part of the commute, are able to get people from home to work in Central London; whereas the outer routes complete local journeys and connect to transport hubs.

There are historic reasons for this. Many inner London buses are the successors to trams and trolleybuses. Their purpose was to get people from the early suburbs to the centre of town. Because of their high frequency and competitive fares, they were so successful that they killed off a number of railway stations close to the terminals. If you look back at old tram route maps, you can still see the clear lineage to current routes.

Bus routes in London have experienced only a couple of major changes in their history. Perhaps the most significant is the Bus Reshaping Plan of 1966, which responded to traffic congestion in the centre by splitting up routes that crossed the capital into overlapping services. These were complemented by new bus routes that operated around suburban

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hubs that would not be vulnerable to central congestion. All this ended the ability to get from outer suburbs to central London in a single trip.

The last significant change came in 2003 when money from the new congestion charge was used to enhance bus services which crossed into the central charge zone. This was intended to encourage more journeys by bus: the improved service carrot to the stick of charging. These reforms saw an increase in bus passengers because the enhanced services could make use of the less congested streets.

The latest changes achieve the strategic plan operation cuts objectives by lopping off sections of routes near the centre. Without wanting to get stuck into too many examples, this means that many inner routes barely enter central London at all. The 134 from Finchley, for example, gets curtailed at the Euston Road instead of going along the length of Tottenham Court Road. The 45 from Clapham Park now turns back at the Elephant and Castle. There are numerous examples where the change makes no sense at all; Transport for London says the hopper fare will mean that you can change buses to complete your journey at no extra charge.

People do not just use the bus because it is cheap. They do so because it is convenient, even if slower. Having to change repeatedly makes the journey longer and less convenient. Buses are subsidised by London Underground fares, and it is a good job they are: if everyone that needed to get from Finchley to Tottenham Court Road did so on the Northern Line and not the 134 the system would be in trouble.

The real losers will be anyone who finds it difficult to get on or off the bus or doesn't want to wait around at night on their own. The rerouting of the number 40 completely away from Fenchurch Street exemplifies how the changes remove convenient and safe interchange. The station is already the only station with no direct tube interchange: now it has no direct bus link either, necessitating a long walk to the nearest options.

A final thought on the changes: they have been communicated terribly by Transport for London. A few announcements on buses that people tend to ignore anyway, and not much else, unless you like to regularly trawl their website for information. Operators who make a lot of big changes all in one go have not been very popular since the May 2018 rail timetable change. Londoners might not be willing to put up with another transport planning fail.

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