

London Forum response to proposed cuts to 33 London bus routes.

1. This response is from the London Forum of Amenity & Civic Societies. We are an umbrella group for over a hundred societies across London, many of whom will have submitted detailed comments on the impact on their locality. The Forum has considered underlying principles which need to be followed if their aspirations are to be met.
2. In summary, we believe the causes of the decline in bus use must be addressed if the objective of 80% of journeys by sustainable means in the London Plan is to be achieved. Buses should be the mode of choice for travellers driven to use vastly overcrowded tube trains for whom the Elizabeth line is not useful.
 - a. The need for a new road pricing scheme, sensitive to time of day and level of demand for road space, is urgent.
 - b. So is enforcement against inconsiderate and illegal parking, and drivers who encroach into bus lanes just enough to block the bus.
 - c. The removal of bus lanes must be reversed, and road schemes must reflect as a priority the need to accommodate terminating buses at places convenient to passengers, rather than reflecting operational convenience.
 - d. Through routes must be retained so that when an upturn in use occurs as a result of continued Good Growth, the bus network is fit for purpose.
 - e. Reducing frequency over well-provided sections of route is preferable to removing sections of route altogether.

The cuts.

3. These include reductions in frequency, which have been made to various routes over the last two years without consultation, shortening routes, abandoning some routes altogether, and introducing one new route. In some cases diverting routes will provide new links, but overall far more existing direct routes will disappear.

Hidden implications

4. Overall there is said to be a 9% cut in central bus services. The impact on each privatised bus company is carefully controlled by TfL, for instance Arriva may not be allowed to bid for the new route 311 even though it partly replaces their current route 19. It was unclear from the responses of TfL (at the meeting called by Travelwatch) how much of the cost of redundancies mid-contract will fall on the tax-payer. Private operators are not going to accept a variation to agreed contracts which hands them additional costs for zero return. One of the routes is so badly shortened that it no longer comes close to any bus garage. All of us will pay for the dead mileage in terms of air quality, and probably the cost of running empty buses as well.

Lessons from history.

5.
 - i) Fifty years ago a scheme called reshaping curtailed several central London routes and replaced them with single decker buses going not very far. Most of them were a total flop and only the 507 & 521 survive.
 - ii) It was a good idea to have a new tube line with relatively few stops and buses serving the stops that were made. This was the Victoria line. Buses continued to be regarded

as in competition with rail until the travelcard was introduced twelve years later. This made for more efficient bus services. The diversion of the 277 from Smithfield to Highbury Corner was a great success, as were the improvements at Archway around 1990 and the bus station at Vauxhall another decade later.

- iii) However, the policy of shortening routes, getting rid of conductors etc. pursued in the 1980s resulted in fewer people occupying the fewer buses operated. Just like Austerity, it failed in its own terms.
- iv) The Improvements to bus routes that preceded the introduction of the Congestion Zone is widely accepted to have been a major factor in the success of the CGZ in its early years.
- v) Congestion has now increased and a more sophisticated system of road pricing is urgently needed to arrest and reverse the decline in bus use which comes at a time when the population is rising.
- vi) The childish games played with the government by the last Mayor resulted in peak fares being too low relative to off peak fares (or off-peak fares too high relative to those at peak times). This has meant that the decline in bus use has been more evident at off-peak times. It would be much easier and more efficient to manage a decline in the morning peak.

6. Basis for the proposed cuts

The proposals are being sold on the basis that shorter routes are more reliable and that a 9% cut is in line with the decline in use since 2011. Originally predicated on an anticipated switch of passengers to the Elizabeth Line, that red herring has been dropped in the face of its delayed appearance and the desire to make the cuts immediately. However, the logic for shortening and scrapping routes, rather than simply reducing frequencies, seems to be based solely on operational considerations. Improving the percentage of buses that run on time is of little help if the journey time for the passenger is increased.

The policy of freezing fares has cushioned the reduction in use but those who need to travel would rather pay more for a service than lose it altogether. The effect of tinkering with the relative levels of fares was that the least well off were faced with larger increases than those most able to pay.

7. The journey time of the bus is not the journey time of the passenger

What the proposals overlook is that it is not the journey time of the bus that matters, but of the passenger. The passenger journey time comprises waiting time at the bus stop and travel time (including dwell times at bus stops). The former is more likely to discourage travel, because of its uncertain length and the environment in which it takes place. Moving slowly on a bus represents some form of progress, and more use can be made of time on a bus than at a bus stop, if one can obtain a seat.

8. How long you wait at a bus stop

The **average** waiting time is the frequency of the bus measured in terms of headway (every x minutes) divided by 2. It is the least satisfactory element of the journey. If there are more routes serving your stop, it is significantly reduced. If buses arrive full, the waiting time is extended. If you are required to walk between stops at the point of interchange, the journey time is also extended. None of these points is taken into account in the T/L consultation document.

9. Benefits of shorter routes

The argument for curtailing services is that they become more reliable. A delay at one end of a long route no longer affects passengers at the other end. However, the best antidote to delays on one route is having a choice of routes, because then a long gap in one service will be masked by the arrival of buses on other suitable routes.

There should be some benefit to passengers in terms of reduced **variance** in waiting times. T/L should pay more attention to minimising the maximum journey time. Rather than looking at whether a journey is for business or leisure, a more sensible breakdown is between journeys where the arrival time is critical and those where it is not. A shopping trip is not about reaching your destination at a given time, so your only concern is how long the journey takes. More time sensitive journeys are those to an entertainment event, to catch a booked train, or to reach a place of education. These journeys require arrival at a given time, so minimising the maximum journey time improves the latest time at which you can set off. In these cases, the variance becomes as relevant as the average. If you improve reliability by 10%, an optimistic figure, you might reduce the maximum journey time spent on the bus by 30%. However if the waiting time has more than doubled, you need to be spending seven times the waiting time on the bus for the improved reliability to compensate for the additional waiting time. If the waiting time is 5 minutes, that means a distance travelled of 5.4 miles+. The average bus journey is about 2 miles.

10. Simplifying the service

The rather patronising attitude that passengers will better understand a simpler service, i.e. less choice, does not withstand scrutiny. There are services where alternate buses are scheduled to turn short. The advantage of cutting back some buses, rather than eliminating them altogether, is that people who want a through journey but are prepared to wait for a through bus are accommodated, and it is easier to rebuild the service when bus usage begins to increase again.

There are millions of people across the country who visit London infrequently and are familiar with routes that have remained substantially unaltered for decades. Some resort to taxis if they can no longer find a familiar route. Not everyone has the time or inclination to bury their nose in a portable telephone device to pick up the latest changes from T/L.

What *is* confusing is the use of a mixture of buses on the same route with different modus operandi. The so-called New Routemaster has three points of access and egress, supposedly to reduce dwell times which are a small part of the waiting time element of the passenger journey. Other buses with dual entrance/exit operate on the basis that entrance is only at the front and egress only via the middle. If passengers are uncertain which regime is to be followed by the next bus, any saving in dwell times is lost. The third entrance comes at the cost of easy access seating on the lower deck.

11. Impact of the Elizabeth Line

The Elizabeth Line, when it does open, will have an effect in terms of modal shift, although probably not as straightforward as T/L would have us believe. Many longer journeys will continue to be made by bus (or Uber, if there is no direct bus) for reasons of mental health, the difficulty of taking heavy luggage down to an underground railway, the additional walking time, etc. This suggests that reductions in frequency would be more appropriate than removing through routes.

12. Disingenuous?

Much of what T/L says needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. For instance, the report on Highbury Corner to Islington Council referred to extra buses on the 30 to compensate for the loss of the 277. In fact, the 30 had been transferred from Tower Transit to Metroline just a week before the 277 ceased to serve Highbury Corner, and the service had been cut. The extra buses are in the peak period, which may be neither here nor there if heavy traffic causes significant delays. It is after dark when people are adversely affected by long waiting times at bus stops, and standing room only when the bus arrives. Russell Square has been served by a succession of routes, the 7, then the 98, then the 10 which is about to be withdrawn ahead of this consultation – prejudicing any response to the proposals for route 14. The present proposals remove buses from Fetter Lane, presumably the next round of cuts will involve shortening another route in order to divert it along this road: “We have listened to concerns you expressed about the lack of a bus on Fetter Lane”.

13. A more constructive way forward

In the 1980s successive rounds of cuts resulted in less use being made of the services that remained. A far more appropriate way forward would be to address the reason for decline in bus use at a time when population growth continues and employment levels are allegedly at an all-time high. We urgently need a modern road pricing scheme that addresses the congestion that has returned after a period of improvement in the years following the introduction of the congestion charge. It is not acceptable to advocate wonderful policies for the long term, such as 80% of journeys by sustainable mode, and then take steps in the short term which leave such goals further away. (That was how the previous Mayor operated).

There are streets which are over served by buses, where frequencies could be reduced. T/L could profitably abandon its idea that routes have to be the same throughout the week and even at night (so the simple passengers can understand).

A more efficient service could be run if road schemes were planned to ensure that there is space for buses to terminate at the places where large numbers of passengers wish to alight or board: stations and hospitals in particular. In the last round of cuts, two routes were diverted to terminate in places few passengers use, simply because a convenient bus bay existed there. Both of these routes face further cuts reflecting the reduced bus occupancy levels these changes achieved. Traffic management schemes should give priority to ensuring there are bus parking bays at the places where large numbers of people want to be. These are usually places from which/to which Santander bikes have to be delivered.

In the long term, use of buses will have to increase if the Mayor is to achieve his goal of 80% of journeys by sustainable means by 2041- walking cycling and new rail infrastructure will not suffice. In the short term, frequency reductions are less harmful than cutting back routes. The Hopper fare is used by a minority of passengers and it is the inconvenience, particularly to people with mental and physical health difficulties, which will force people to stay at home or call upon Uber. There must be a pledge to retain all bus garages. Replacing those lost at the time of privatisation was a headache for T/L when expanding the services in preparation for the Congestion Charge Zone.