

Response by Andrew Bosi, London Forum Planning & Transport Committee, to Assembly bus scrutiny

July 2013

I maintain contact with users and operators through the Friends of Capital Transport Campaign. I represent also the London Forum of Civic & Amenity Societies on Transport matters. In the course of work including voluntary activities, I travel extensively across London and I would expect to experience the use of at least 80 bus routes each year.

There is plenty of feedback from developments such as King's Cross because many of these contacts and I myself are familiar with it; less from substantial new residential developments because their residents are "new" and less aware of the familiar channels of communication.

The experience of King's Cross is that TfL has indeed been slow to implement some modest proposals but forward by one of the third sector umbrella groups some time ago. With the continued growth in numbers using the buses (unabated even in times of economic uncertainty) the concept of cuts elsewhere to cater for areas of growth is a non-starter unless there are significant improvements in the rail network that take substantial numbers from bus to rail.

The Overground has seen significant improvements, but buses in north-east London are the most overcrowded in my experience (mainly of Sunday afternoon services). Rail replacement services struggle to meet demand, and relatively high frequency buses like the 25 and 69 turn passengers away. Stratford is over-run, Barking is chaotic because of a lack of co-operation from c2c which runs the station. There are no obvious bus routes in south London to have been relieved by the completion of the Overground circle: it has simply opened up new destinations for local residents. CrossRail may relieve the 25 but only to the extent of making the travelling conditions legal for the movement of livestock (humans are denied the same protection). People make life choices about where to live on the basis of existing transport links and this is why changes such as the recently ditched Thameslink proposals cause such an outcry.

With the constant emphasis on overcrowding there has been an over-emphasis on what are seen as key routes at the expense of less frequent services. My impression is that if there is a driver shortage at Highgate garage it is always a 4 that is cancelled rather than a 43. In the evenings this makes for a 40 minute gap which is completely unacceptable even though more people would be more moderately inconvenienced by the loss of the 43.

It is obvious from the various vox pops responding to news stories about HS2 that London is perceived as unduly privileged by those living outside the capital. Most tweeters will have little concept of the vast numbers attempting to travel at what elsewhere in the country are off-peak periods. If the subsidy to London buses were expressed in terms of pounds per passenger mile rather than just an annual figure, it would better reflect its level.

TfL is over-focused on the cost of delivering the morning peak service. The economy may depend on it, but for many people (depending on the nature of their work) arriving a few minutes late for work is a minor irritation compared with arriving too late for the start of the concert or football match, or the departure of their train. I have argued for some time that journeys should be analysed not as business or leisure but as arrival time sensitive or not. If the arrival time is critical, it is the standard deviation of the journey time (from point to point, not bus stop to bus stop) that matters most, not the mean journey time.

For this reason, coupled with the resistance to change occasioned by having chosen a place of residence on the basis of existing transport links, I favour longer routes which may be more susceptible to delay over short routes which require passengers to change. There are other reasons for supporting longer routes: the environment of the interchange point, particularly in inclement weather, and the understandable reluctance of TfL to entertain time based tickets (although technology changes yet to happen might cause this to be revisited). Short routes give rise to some anomalies in making buses more expensive than the tube (although they are minor compared with the perverse incentives created by the abolition of the zone 2-6 travelcard). Anomalies and perverse incentives distort pattern of use and need to be addressed before looking at changes to that pattern.

London Forum trustees consider that fast bus routes which miss out some stops, like the 607 from Uxbridge to Shepherds Bush, could attract more business travelers and reduce car usage.

I hope the committee finds these comments constructive in forming its view.