

Sadiq Khan  
Mayor of London  
City Hall  
The Queen's Walk  
London SE1 2AA

7 August 2018

Dear Sadiq

## **London's River Bus services**

London's river has fantastic potential to enhance our transport network, but it is being under-utilised. On 16 May 2018, the Transport Committee discussed this topic with representatives of Transport for London, Port of London Authority, MBNA Thames Clippers and River Bus passengers. The committee also attended a site visit on 28 June 2018 to experience the River Bus service. I am writing to share the views of the committee on the River Bus and the opportunities to increase passenger journeys.

In this letter, I will set out:

- The need for a River Ambassador to provide the leadership required to promote river passenger transport.
- The importance of improving publicity, passenger information and accessibility.
- The critical priority for TfL to address congestion around piers in central London.
- The need to reduce harmful emissions from river vessels.

Once people have tried river transport, they like it. Emma McFarlane, the passenger representative we met, described journeys on the River Bus as a highly positive experience:

"You queue up. You get on the boat. You have a lovely seat. You may or may not get a window seat. If you are feeling thirsty, you pop in and have a coffee, a tea, a pastry, something hot... I cannot really complain. The experience itself is amazing and everybody I have spoken to - and I have spoken to a lot of passengers - has really loved the service."

We heard that the Thames has much unrealised potential for passenger journeys and that the river could be used as a Tube line, akin to an aquatic Hammersmith and City Line. Though passenger journeys have been increasing, the committee was informed of a number of issues that need to be addressed to achieve the PLA's ambitious target of doubling passenger journeys on the Thames, which your Transport Strategy endorses. We would urge you and TfL to consider our findings as you set the priorities for the Thames and London Waterways Forum and develop the Pier Strategy.

**TfL should demonstrate greater commitment to River Bus services.** Without significant strategic planning and leadership, the river's potential to be used as a transport link on a par with other modes of transport will remain unrealised. We are pleased to see the management of London River Services has been enhanced by linking it up with the cable car and Cycle Hire. Further, we believe the appointment of a River Ambassador would provide the leadership required to promote river passenger transport. There is scope for better engagement with boroughs and other stakeholders to establish the River Bus as a key part of London's transport network and to invite investment for new infrastructure or upgrades. The River Bus could serve riverside residential developments such as Convoys Wharf, Thamesmead Waterfront and Barking Riverside, as well as other areas near the river with limited access to public transport, such as Erith in Bexley. On 28 June, the committee also heard about the potential for a number of additional cross-river services that could link in with the linear River Bus routes. The committee feels that cross-river services have potential to connect communities to the river and other transport modes – especially in East London where there are fewer crossings – and would hope that TfL will explore this further with MBNA Thames Clippers.

**TfL should set interim targets in the business plan to ensure that commuter passenger journeys increase in the coming years.** While total passenger journeys on the Thames have steadily increased over the years, most of the increase has been from tourist services. Regular and commuter journeys on the River Bus account for only 20 to 30 per cent of total passenger journeys on the Thames. We would like to see more emphasis on increasing regular passenger journeys.

**TfL should improve publicity and passenger information to attract more passengers.**

More action must be taken to promote the River Bus as a viable transport mode.

- Guests told the committee there was scope to improve signage to and from all piers, particularly at interchanges with other transport modes, to help passengers who don't use the River Bus on a regular basis. London Bridge City pier, for instance, is very close to a major station but is harder to find because it has non-standard signage.
- Guests told us that it should be easier for passengers to find River Bus options for their journeys to raise awareness of the River Bus. TfL should ensure that River Bus journeys are displayed clearly on the journey planner.
- We believe TfL should review how the River Bus piers, if not the routes, can be more effectively identified on the Tube map.

**TfL should work with partners to ensure all piers used by River Bus services are accessible.** Though most of the service is accessible, there are a number of smaller piers that are not accessible. London Bridge City Pier, for example, has a very steep gradient which is unsuitable for people with mobility support needs or those with pushchairs. TfL should be more active in the management of the piers that require improved accessibility and should ensure those piers are upgraded, seeking private investment where necessary. Additionally, TfL should update its map of scheduled river services so that it is clear that mobility scooter users should join the MBNA Thames Clippers Mobility Scooter Recognition Scheme in advance of travel.

**TfL should work with partners to actively manage congestion around the central piers.**

The committee heard that one of the biggest problems was congestion around piers in central London, between Tower Bridge and Westminster. A number of possible solutions to relieve the pinch points were discussed including: upgrading and extending piers to enable more efficient utilisation of limited space; seeking efficiencies in timetables, the River Bus routes and the time taken for boarding and alighting; and prioritising River Bus services over tourist services during peak hours. Emma, the passenger representative, told us that reliability was essential. TfL should work with partners to ensure that delays are reduced and the higher frequency of boats during peak hours are maintained.

**TfL should work with partners to reduce river emissions.** The PLA told the committee that river vessels tend to emit lower levels of Carbon and particulate matter compared to road transport. However, river vessels emit higher levels of Nitrogen Oxides due to less stringent engine standards. TfL should work with partners to develop river-specific emissions standards to reduce all river vessel emissions and use its licencing powers to incentivise take-up of improved technologies. Proactive engagement with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency is also required to ensure the MCA recognises the benefits of encouraging new, cleaner technology. Without this, there is a risk that a boom in river travel – which we would welcome – could undermine your own efforts to reduce dangerous emissions.

Given the importance of the river and the pressure on other modes, we think it is essential for River Bus services to be given more support as outlined above. We look forward to your response to our suggestions to improve river services for passengers.

Yours sincerely,

**Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM**  
**Chair, Transport Committee**