

**Report of Transport Committee seminar**  
**'The Future of London's Buses'**

January 2010





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# Chair's foreword

London's bus services are facing change. The annual operating bus subsidy, which has funded recent expansion of the bus network and improvements to buses, is set to reduce by more than one-third from £700 million in 2008/09 to £450 million in 2017/18. For the first time in several decades, the bus network is not anticipated to expand at all in the three-year period to 2011/12.



At the end of last year, we held a seminar to debate publicly this changing situation and consider the future for London's buses. Bringing together a range of people with different viewpoints, we heard about the potential implications of a reduction in the bus subsidy, the value for money of London's bus services, and the wider role of buses in London life.

Our seminar highlighted the integral role of the bus in the capital's transport system. Compared with other public transport modes, the bus offers greater flexibility with scope to change its route to meet different demands. It is readily accessible; in London, the bus network covers the whole city, with over 90 percent of all households being situated within 400 metres of a bus service.

Our seminar also showed the wider benefits of London's buses. They help to promote social inclusion by providing affordable transport to people on low incomes and those whose working hours might make it difficult to use other forms of public transport. They contribute to improvements in public health, helping older people to get to shops and doctors, maintain family and social networks, and remain active. They help reduce carbon dioxide emissions by providing an alternative to cars, particularly in outer London where other public transport can be limited.

This report sets out the findings from our seminar and, in light of these findings, poses a number of questions for the Mayor. We look forward to receiving a response from the Mayor and intend to follow-up the findings in our future work.

I would like to thank all the speakers, experts and audience members who participated in our seminar.

# Overview

On 8 December 2009 we held a seminar examining the future of London buses focusing particularly on the role, effectiveness and affordability of London's bus service and its wider benefits and value for money.

Buses are a fundamental feature of the capital. They are by far the most used mode of public transport in London with nearly two billion journeys each year, compared with around one billion on the London Underground, 800 million on the National Rail network and nearly 200 million journeys by bike. Almost half of Londoners use buses on at least two days a week compared to around a quarter who use the Underground at least twice a week and 13 per cent who use National Rail services at least twice a week. People on low incomes are the most likely to make trips by bus.<sup>1</sup>

Our seminar was particularly timely. It followed indications that the Mayor (who is also chair of Transport for London (TfL)) has a different approach to buses from his predecessor. Whilst under the former Mayor the bus network expanded and the bus operating subsidy grew significantly, from £41 million in 1999/2000 to £653 million in 2007/08<sup>2</sup>, the current Mayor has focused on reducing the bus subsidy. In November 2008 TfL commissioned KPMG to undertake a review of London's bus services with a specific focus on how the subsidy could be reduced.<sup>3</sup> TfL's latest business plan shows the subsidy will fall from £700 million in 2008/09 to around £450 million by 2017/18.<sup>4</sup>

Our seminar was split into two parts, each with guest speakers and a panel discussion involving a range of experts and audience members. This short report summarises the issues covered in each part of the seminar. A full transcript is also available and has been published on our website, alongside a review of research into the utility of bus services that we commissioned. These can be found at:  
[http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/scrutiny/transport\\_bus\\_seminar.jsp](http://www.london.gov.uk/assembly/scrutiny/transport_bus_seminar.jsp)

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<sup>1</sup> TfL, *Travel in London, Report Number 1*, April 2009, pp. 24 & 146

<sup>2</sup> KPMG LLP, *Independent strategic review of the provision of bus services in London*, 16 July 2009, pp. 14 & 22

<sup>3</sup> KPMG LLP, *Independent strategic review of the provision of bus services in London*, 16 July 2009

<sup>4</sup> TfL, *Business Plan 2009/10 – 2017/18*, October 2009

## Questions for the Mayor

In light of the discussion at our seminar and the review of research into the utility of bus services, we have some questions for the Mayor. These are set out at the relevant points within the body of this report to provide context. They are also listed in full below for ease of reference:

- Following the KPMG review, what further work are you and TfL now undertaking to implement your plans to reduce expenditure on London's buses?
- How far is this work covering factors such as the breadth of bus coverage in London and the scope of concessionary fares?
- What formal assessment has been made of the scope to meet a long-term increased demand for buses through increased capacity on other modes of transport and TfL "sweating its assets"?
- What formal assessment has been made of the extent to which home working and flexible work patterns could reduce demand for buses?
- What, if any, cost/benefit analysis of London's buses has been undertaken that takes account of their wider social and environmental benefits?
- How will you use the findings from our seminar and review of research in developing your approach to London's buses?

We look forward to receiving a response to these questions. We will publish the response on our web site.



# Part one - the role, effectiveness and affordability of London's buses

In the first part of our seminar we heard from Steven Norris, TfL Board Member and former Minister for Transport in London, and Professor Peter White, Professor of Public Transport Systems at the University of Westminster. We then had a panel discussion with the following experts: David Brown, Managing Director of Surface Transport at TfL; Anton Valk, Chief Executive of NedRailways; and Roger French, Managing Director of Brighton and Hove Bus and Coach Company.

## **Speech from Steven Norris, TfL Board Member and former Minister for Transport in London**

Steven told us this was an extremely timely seminar; there was nothing more important in TfL's remit than to "bear down constantly" on the bus service.<sup>5</sup> The starting point was that London's buses were doing an excellent job but it was important not to be complacent and to ask "What can be done better or what is missing from London's bus services?"

Steven commented that, in 1994, when he was a Minister, the bus subsidy had been just £1 million per annum. Although there were fewer bus journeys then, growth in ridership was faster than at any time since because bus lanes had highlighted the benefits of buses to non-users. These benefits included cheapness compared to other modes of transport, relative speed and the ability for passengers to "turn up and go." People did not need to know timetables but could simply walk to the bus station or stop and know a bus would arrive to take them on their journey.

Steven reported on a need to concentrate on what was good about London's buses but at an affordable price. Under the present Mayor, TfL had made great strides in reducing the bus subsidy through internal efficiencies. The KPMG report had been a good first step in identifying £30-50 million of savings per annum. without affecting bus services directly. However, it was now necessary to consider other factors. He queried the breadth of bus coverage in London and whether the private hire industry might be able to provide more services on marginal bus routes at late hours. He commented on the comparatively low bus fares and suggested the fact that 40 per cent of bus passengers did not currently pay (due to concessionary fares) had a significant impact on the viability of the service.

He also highlighted, in the context of bus provision, what he described as "probably the most under-utilised and under-valued element in transport strategy in this country": eliminating the need to travel at all. Steven stressed the ease with which it is now possible to connect with

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 2

family, work, shopping and leisure “without the need to get on either a bus or a Tube or to use a car”.

**Questions to the Mayor:**

**Following the KPMG review, what further work are you and TfL now undertaking to implement your plans to reduce expenditure on London’s buses?**

**How far is this work covering factors such as the breadth of bus coverage in London and the scope of concessionary fares?**

**Speech from Peter White, Professor of Public Transport Systems at the University of Westminster**

Peter began by suggesting it was important to consider the role of buses alongside the use of other modes of transport. Trains and the Tube were often used for major journeys into central London whereas buses were used for other, shorter journeys, often by people on low incomes who did not have cars. About three quarters of all bus trips in London were entirely outside zone 1.

Peter highlighted the large growth in total bus trips since 1999/2000, which he attributed to a range of factors including an increase in the number of bus kilometres operated and a more extensive bus service. He argued that since bus deregulation in the mid-1980s the real average cost per bus kilometre operated had declined and explored the potential to cut costs further. He suggested there was limited scope for more private bus operators because it was difficult for them to secure sites from which to run buses. He commented that offering free bus travel for school children and people over 60 years old especially at peak times resulted in higher capacity costs from putting on extra vehicles.

Peter suggested the most effective way to cut costs in London’s bus service would be to make buses go faster since most costs, such as drivers’ wages, varied by time. This could be achieved through bus priority measures, the Congestion Charge and more road pricing elsewhere in London. He expressed strong reservations about any major cuts to expenditure on buses when, at the same time, there was high spending on other modes of transport such as for the upgrades to the Tube. He argued any major service cuts or large fare increases would have a regressive effect given the income of bus users compared with rail users.

## The panel discussion

Audience members raised a number of issues with our panel of experts.

*How is TfL taking account of London's predicted population increase in its plans for bus services?*

David Brown of TfL reported that, despite a recent dip in bus passenger journeys and an anticipated decrease in the number of bus passengers following the fares increase in early 2010, TfL was predicting the number of bus journeys and passengers to come back by 2017/18 and the number of bus kilometres it operated to flatline. TfL would, therefore, rely on external factors to help address any long-term growth in demand for buses such as increased capacity on the Tube following upgrade work and the construction of Crossrail. In addition, TfL would need to "sweat the assets", becoming smarter about where there was peak demand and how to move its resources around to deal with that.

### Question to the Mayor:

**What formal assessment has been made of the scope to meet a long-term increased demand for buses through increased capacity on other modes of transport and TfL "sweating its assets"?**

*What is going to happen to bus services in outer London?*

David Brown told us "there are no plans to cut the services in outer London."<sup>6</sup> Steven Norris commented that the Mayor considered his responsibilities extended to all London Boroughs and not just Zone 1. In response to a follow up question on free travel he said that he personally felt there was a case for rethinking the generosity of some of the concessions. For example, he questioned whether free travel for school children at peak hours was consistent with the Government's agenda to combat childhood obesity and encourage people to walk and cycle.

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<sup>6</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 11

*Why is the bus subsidy so high when many buses are running with few passengers?*

David Brown reported that it was a myth that TfL operated empty buses. The bus network had better utilisation rates than the Tube with an average of 17 passengers on any bus at any time. He explained that when providing a bus route there was a need to cater for the peak capacity required at any point on that route which would vary.

Roger French of the Brighton and Hove Bus and Coach Company acknowledged the success of London's bus service but queried the level of subsidy. He reported the cost of the service in Brighton was £5.60 per head of population compared to £76 in London. He said "I get on a bus [in London] and I could travel right over to the other side of the city and probably pay £1...; a pound. I cannot even get a cup of coffee for a pound. What are you doing charging such ridiculously low fares? If you have got a really good service, do not give it away too cheaply."<sup>7</sup>

Steven Norris reported that he did not think the bus subsidy could be eliminated altogether given the significant increases in costs associated with drivers' wages, fuel and upgrading bus vehicles. However, it was important to ask why bus operators elsewhere in the UK could provide services without a high level of subsidy. He queried the value of providing free bus travel for children when there was a nationwide push to combat childhood obesity. He suggested there was a case for rethinking the generosity of some bus fare concessions on health grounds, as well as on the cost to the bus service.

*What is the potential to make savings without impacting directly on bus services?*

Anton Valk of NedRailways reported that TfL's current tendering process for bus service contracts worked well and bus operators did not necessarily make a lot of money in London. He stressed the importance of maintaining the high quality of London's buses, commenting these were often easier to use and more frequent than abroad and were an integral part of the transport network. It was important not to "throw this away"<sup>8</sup> although it was also important to ensure the bus service was efficient and affordable.

One member of the audience commented on the potential to save by simplifying the specification for bus vehicles. There could, for example, be windows at the front of buses to avoid the need to install

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<sup>7</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 8

<sup>8</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 16

air conditioning. In response, David Brown reported that TfL's specification for buses was based on market research with passengers. Air coolers (not air conditioning) had been installed following passenger complaints.

*How can we encourage Londoners to shift from using cars to buses to help tackle climate change?*

David Brown commented that, since 2003, there had been a seven per cent modal shift towards bus use because of the growth in the number of buses and the performance of the bus network. He emphasised the importance of achieving this modal shift, otherwise the quality of life in London would worsen.

Roger French suggested that to achieve a further shift it might be necessary to reflect on the ambience of buses. This could help "get someone who is comfortable driving a BMW out of that BMW into the bus."<sup>9</sup> He reported that elsewhere companies were making profits running higher quality bus vehicles.

One member of the audience suggested TfL could do more to promote its buses as viable alternatives to other modes of transport for longer journeys. He commented on the potential market for more passengers in areas like Clapham where it was possible for buses, as well as road and rail, to take people all the way to central London.

Steven Norris queried the need for people to travel at all. He highlighted advances in technology which made it easier for home working. In response, Professor Peter White commented that very few people wanted to be full time home workers and that, in any event, only a small part of the working population was able to work at home.

**Question to the Mayor:**

**What formal assessment has been made of the extent to which home working and flexible work patterns could reduce demand for buses?**

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<sup>9</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 16

## Part two - the benefits of the bus service and value for money

In the second part of our seminar, we heard from Stephen Joseph, Executive Director of Campaign for Better Transport, and Pamela Moffatt, Transport Adviser to Age Concern London. We then had a panel discussion with the following experts: Kulveer Ranger, the Mayor's Transport Adviser; Dr Peter Kenway, Director and co-founder of the New Policy Institute; and Dr Juliet Solomon, Principal Research Fellow at London Metropolitan University.

### **Speech from Stephen Joseph, Executive Director of Campaign for Better Transport**

Stephen told us it was important to consider the environmental benefits of buses. Buses could help reduce carbon dioxide emissions and reduce traffic locally since many visitors to local shops travelled by bus. He suggested such benefits were not always reflected in TfL's business case for buses. Whilst money spent on roads and transport projects was considered investment and therefore good, the bus subsidy was seen as something that you could remove. He argued, "at least some of the money that goes into London buses should be treated as investment in London and its people."<sup>10</sup>

Stephen suggested that there was a need to improve and extend London's bus services to help address the gaps in the Mayor's draft Transport Strategy for reducing carbon dioxide emissions and tackling congestion. He felt there should be more bus priority measures to help increase the speed of the bus network, early inclusion of bus services when planning urban developments and more marketing of public transport and travel planning in outer London Boroughs. The bus service represented value for money given its wider benefits but there was scope to broaden this with more public transport-friendly urban development integrated with travel planning.

### **Speech from Pamela Moffatt, Transport Adviser to Age Concern London**

Pamela reported on the benefits of bus services for older Londoners. She highlighted that 30 per cent of Londoners aged 60 plus had reported restricted ability to travel and the main mode of transport for people aged 70 plus was buses. It was, therefore, important to tackle the barriers to transport faced by older Londoners and ensure their continued access to buses. Older people's reasons for using buses might vary. They included keeping in touch with family and friends, shopping, social activities, health-related visits and even just having an opportunity to leave their homes.

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<sup>10</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 19

Pamela argued that the benefits to older Londoners' general health and well-being should be included in any cost/benefit analysis of bus services. Buses could help older people shop for healthy food and ensure they kept active. With the growing emphasis on health and social care taking place in the local community, older people needed buses so they could get to health centres. Any curtailment of bus services or fare concessions for older people could lead to costs in their health and well-being and adversely affect their quality of life.

**Question to the Mayor:**

**What, if any, cost/benefit analysis of London's buses has been undertaken that takes account of their wider social and environmental benefits?**

**The panel discussion**

Audience members raised a number of issues with our panel of experts.

*How will the Mayor's draft Transport Strategy improve the quality of life for Londoners?*

Kulveer Ranger, the Mayor's Transport Adviser, reported that he recognised the wider importance of buses for older Londoners. It had become a lifestyle choice for people to use buses and this choice must be protected. He reported that Londoners' quality of life was prioritised in everything that the Mayor did; his three main draft strategies (the Transport Strategy, the Economic Development Strategy and the London Plan) had been launched simultaneously to reflect this.

Dr Juliet Solomon of London Metropolitan University highlighted a need to recognise the importance of buses in terms of human beings and local journeys rather than just in terms of economic growth. Public transport was one of a number of factors influencing the quality of life for older people. Many had already been adversely affected by the closure of local post offices and public lavatories.

*What will be the impact of the increase in bus fares from January 2010?*

Dr Peter Kenway of the New Policy Institute reported that the 12.3 per cent increase in bus fares would affect a key group of bus users – the in-work poor. These were people who did jobs that could not be

done by home working such as cleaning, cooking and caring, who often travelled to work much earlier than office workers. He suggested that the fares policy should be revisited, arguing there was more scope for “doing sensible economic things”<sup>11</sup> with the fares structure for the Tube. He also suggested the only real way to get additional capacity into the public transport network was through buses. Recent delays with upgrading the Jubilee Line showed a difficulty in expanding capacity on the Tube.

Stephen Joseph reiterated the importance of bus services to Londoners on low wages. He commented that, in addition to the wider health and social costs if bus services were cut, there could be a cost to employers, particularly employers of low-income people, who could experience difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

Kulveer Ranger told us everybody who had concessionary fares prior to the bus fares increase had been protected. The Mayor’s priority had been to “make sure those who are most vulnerable and most susceptible to economic hardship are protected, regardless of what community and ethnicity they come from.”<sup>12</sup>

#### *What do Londoners using bus services want?*

There was considerable discussion about the importance of ensuring bus services in London meet local needs, particularly when new health centres or polyclinics are built. Stephen Joseph re-emphasised the importance of travel planning. All relevant authorities including TfL and health service providers needed to work together to ensure sufficient public transport was provided.

Some members of the audience commented on the need for TfL to undertake better consultation on bus services. One commented, “we are customers. Listen to your customers and respond accordingly.”<sup>13</sup> In response, Kulveer Ranger reported that there had been concern about TfL’s responsiveness to its customers but a more robust consultation process had now been put in place. Other people stressed the importance of TfL providing better information on bus services. Many bus interchanges, such as Vauxhall, did not have the Countdown facilities which provided real time bus service information. In response, Kulveer Ranger stressed that there was a desire to maintain investment in programmes such as the Countdown system but there was also a need to recognise that the current financial situation meant less money was available than before.

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<sup>11</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 28

<sup>12</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 29

<sup>13</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 28



Pamela Moffatt commented on the importance of accessible transport. There should be bus stops in the right places, accessible buses with ramps that actually worked for wheelchair users access, and bus drivers who understood passengers' needs.

**Question to the Mayor:**

**How will you use the findings from our seminar and review of research in developing your approach to London's buses?**

# Conclusion

Our seminar has highlighted the importance of buses in the capital and the transformation in the bus service in recent years. As Dr Solomon commented, “it is very, very exciting we have got a wonderful, wonderful bus system in London now.”<sup>14</sup>

All participants agreed buses were an integral part of the capital’s transport network and recognised the importance of maintaining a comprehensive bus service despite the current financial challenges. However, there were different views on how and to what extent the service should be supported.

In future, there is likely to be increased demand for public transport including buses as London’s population increases and its economy grows after the recession. Our seminar showed buses have an important role to play in transporting many different people around the city. They have particular value for shorter journeys especially in outer London where the car is often the only alternative; and for people on low incomes.

We look to the Mayor, who is currently finalising his Transport Strategy, to ensure these factors are taken into account in his final strategy and look forward to receiving a response from him to the specific questions posed. We intend to follow-up the seminar’s main findings in our future work scrutinising the implementation of the Mayor’s Transport Strategy and in fulfilling our ongoing role to monitor the delivery of transport services in the capital on behalf of Londoners.

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<sup>14</sup> Transcript of the seminar, page 30

# Appendix 1 Orders and translations

## How to order

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### Chinese

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### Vietnamese

Nếu ông (bà) muốn nội dung văn bản này được dịch sang tiếng Việt, xin vui lòng liên hệ với chúng tôi bằng điện thoại, thư hoặc thư điện tử theo địa chỉ ở trên.

### Greek

*Εάν επιθυμείτε περίληψη αυτού του κειμένου στην γλώσσα σας, παρακαλώ καλέστε τον αριθμό ή επικοινωνήστε μαζί μας στην ανωτέρω ταχυδρομική ή την ηλεκτρονική διεύθυνση.*

### Turkish

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### Punjabi

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਸ ਦਸਤਾਵੇਜ਼ ਦਾ ਸੰਖੇਪ ਆਪਣੀ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਲੈਣਾ ਚਾਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਇਸ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਫ਼ੋਨ ਕਰੋ ਜਾਂ ਉਪਰ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਡਾਕ ਜਾਂ ਈਮੇਲ ਪਤੇ 'ਤੇ ਸਾਨੂੰ ਸੰਪਰਕ ਕਰੋ।

### Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज़ का सारांश अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

### Bengali

আপনি যদি এই দলিলের একটা সারাংশ নিজের ভাষায় পেতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে ফোন করবেন অথবা উল্লিখিত ডাক ঠিকানায় বা ই-মেইল ঠিকানায় আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করবেন।

### Urdu

اگر آپ کو اس دستاویز کا خلاصہ اپنی زبان میں درکار ہو تو، براہ کرم نمبر پر فون کریں یا منکورہ بالا ڈاک کے پتے یا ای میل پتے پر ہم سے رابطہ کریں۔

### Arabic

الحرص على ملخص لهذا المستند بلغة  
فرجاء الاتصال بمرقم الهاتف أو الاتصال على  
العنوان البريدي أو العادي أو عنوان البريد  
الإلكتروني أعلاه.

### Gujarati

જો તમારે આ દસ્તાવેજનો સાર તમારી ભાષામાં જોઈતો હોય તો ઉપર આપેલ નંબર પર ફોન કરો અથવા ઉપર આપેલ ટપાલ અથવા ઈ-મેઇલ સરનામા પર અમારો સંપર્ક કરો.

## Appendix 2 Principles of scrutiny page

### **An aim for action**

An Assembly scrutiny is not an end in itself. It aims for action to achieve improvement.

### **Independence**

An Assembly scrutiny is conducted with objectivity; nothing should be done that could impair the independence of the process.

### **Holding the Mayor to account**

The Assembly rigorously examines all aspects of the Mayor's strategies.

### **Inclusiveness**

An Assembly scrutiny consults widely, having regard to issues of timeliness and cost.

### **Constructiveness**

The Assembly conducts its scrutinies and investigations in a positive manner, recognising the need to work with stakeholders and the Mayor to achieve improvement.

### **Value for money**

When conducting a scrutiny the Assembly is conscious of the need to spend public money effectively.

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