

London cannot afford a bus service slowdown

Road traffic congestion is damaging the capital's most important form of public transport with a variety of ill-effects



The London bus service is threatened by congestion Photograph: Graham Turner for the Guardian

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[Dave Hill](#)

Dave Hill has been writing for the Guardian since 1984 and its award-winning London commentator since 2008

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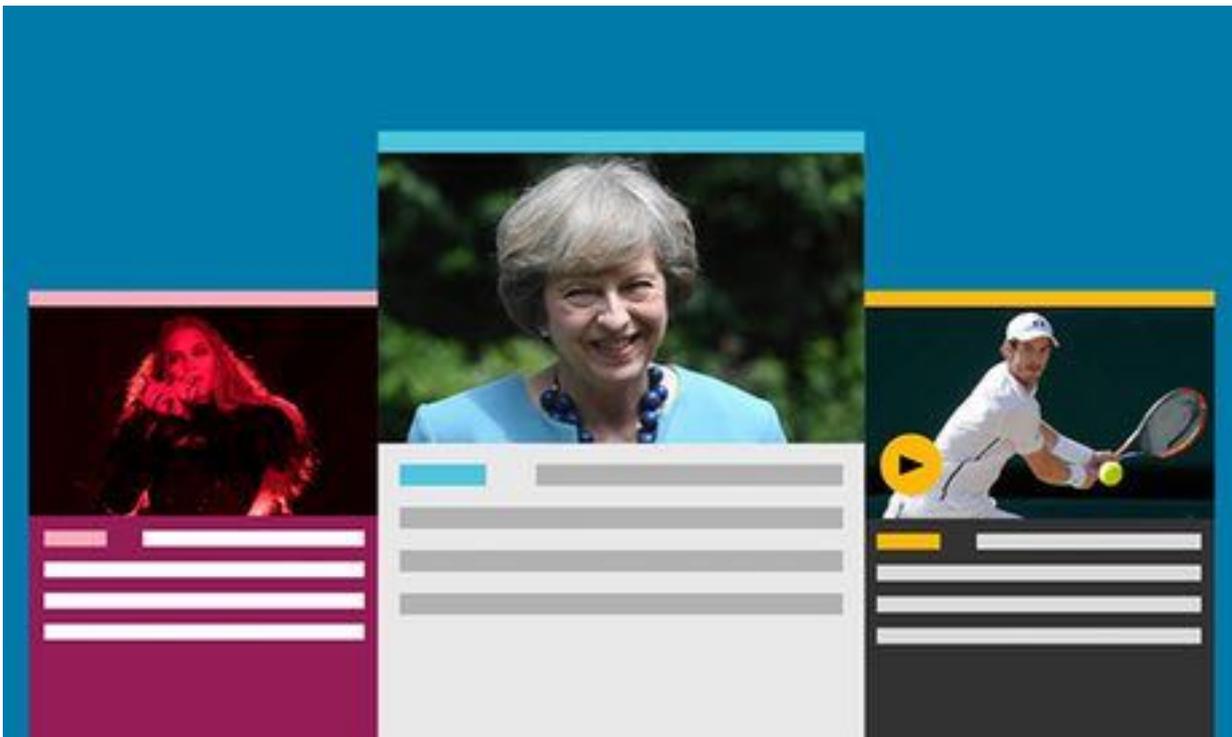
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All over Britain, buses are slowing down. They're doing it in Brighton, Edinburgh, Manchester, Bristol and Hull and most of all they're doing it in London. Over the past year, speeds on a third of London's bus routes have fallen by more than 5%, reducing some of them to walking speed: route 11, which [runs between Fulham Broadway and Liverpool Street station](#), averages just 4 mph in parts.

As a result, people are giving up on using buses. For ten years after the formation of Transport for London (TfL), the capital's bus service was a huge success. Only three years ago, demand for bus services was [expected to keep on rising](#). Now, London is experiencing one of the fastest declines in bus use in the land. The implications for the city are profound.

The problem is an increase in road traffic congestion, which has seen journey times for road traffic increase in Central London by 12% a year since 2012, [according to analysts Inrix](#). Congestion is a menace to air quality, a drag on business efficiency and a growing nuisance to Londoners of every kind as they try to get around the city. It has hit the bus service especially hard.



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The startling facts and consequences of the London bus slowdown have been set out in a [report](#) for the [Greener Journeys campaign](#), a bus industry-backed body [supported by](#), among others, Transport for London (TfL) and the [Campaign for Better Transport](#), which seeks to persuade car-users to switch to buses and coaches. The report has been compiled by Professor David Begg, a [Greener Journeys adviser](#), former chair of the government's (now defunct) [commission for integrated transport](#), ex-member of the TfL board, and currently proprietor of [Transport Times](#).

Begg sets his findings in the context of TfL's finances and new London mayor Sadiq Khan's pledge to freeze public transport fares for four years. Pointing out that the government is to phase out the capital's public transport revenue subsidy from the 2018/19 financial year - making it the only major city in the world expected to do without one except Hong Kong - at the same time as Khan's freeze is introduced, he says that part of the solution to making TfL's ends meet "is to operate buses more efficiently by improving their speed".

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He calculates that if bus speeds could be increased by 24% it would enable TfL to make up for the loss a £461m annual bus subsidy. That is because if buses are able to cover their routes more swiftly, reducing the time it takes them to get between stops, fewer of them are likely to be needed on each route. This would reduce the cost of running the routes without leaving passengers waiting longer at bus stops. A more efficient, reliable bus service would also be a more popular one, meaning that income from fares would go up. At the moment, everything is heading the wrong way. As former TfL commissioner Sir Peter Hendy writes in his foreword to Begg's report, worsening congestion in London is increasing costs and decreasing revenue when the exact reverse is needed.

Some of the more recent causes of congestion might lessen before too long, as the roadworks required for Crossrail and cycle superhighways are completed, but the growth in the number of delivery vans and private hire vehicles together with the loss of road space to cycling have worked against the good effects of the congestion charge, introduced in 2003. This enabled the bus service to thrive, both by opening up more space for it and helping to pay for it.

Boris Johnson, who came to power in 2008 promising to "smooth traffic flow", made matters worse thanks to his piecemeal policy appeasement of influential voter and lobby groups when he should have been implementing a coherent road space management strategy in a city in increasing need of it as its population rapidly grows. As Begg observes ([pages 52/53](#)):

When his term as London Mayor ended, [Boris Johnson](#) warned his successor that he will have to take action to cut traffic volumes by increasing the congestion charge. However, this solution has resulted from the decisions he took during his eight years in office. He exacerbated the problem by removing the western extension of the congestion zone and by reducing road capacity in central London by 25% on key routes through the introduction of cycle superhighways without taking action to curtail traffic in central London. Both decisions were taken against the advice of TfL.

Dealing with this legacy will be a challenge for Mayor Khan, a former transport minister and a London bus-driver's son, and his incoming transport deputy Val Shawcross, who as a London

Assembly member was a strong champion of the bus service. Khan's manifesto recognised that congestion is a continuing problem. But he has pledged to continue the cycle superhighways programme, including by investing in new routes. And although he's promised to try to co-ordinate roadworks better and reduce the number of heavy vehicles using London's roads, he has not pledged to expand congestion charging and has promised to maintain the charge at its present level.

Enlarging the forthcoming [Ultra Low Emission Zone](#) and bringing it in a year sooner than Johnson's target date of 2020 - moves Khan is [already consulting on](#) - might help to mitigate congestion, as the daily charge it will raise on polluting vehicles should deter owners of some of them from taking to the roads. But how far this might help the bus service and its passengers remains to be seen.

It doesn't help that, despite being by far the most heavily used of London's public transport services, the bus service is too often ignored. Begg sums the problem up:

Too little focus is placed on the importance of the bus because bus passengers carry too little weight with opinion-formers and political decision-makers. The socio-economic profile of bus passengers is very different from rail users, motorists and cyclists, with a much higher percentage of those on lower income travelling by bus.

Will the bus driver's son give London's bus service and those who use it the attention and the backing they deserve?

This article was updated at 09:00. It now includes a different quote from Professor Begg's report about the effect of Boris Johnson's transport policies on congestion, which makes his point more fully for the purposes of this article than the one originally used. Read the full report [here](#).

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