

# TfL urged to reverse bus network decline

David Leeder says TfL's own policies have put the city's buses in reverse gear. Former TfL executive Leon Daniels agrees that changes are required

## POLICY

► Transport for London's bus deficit "could easily increase by 4-6% per annum" unless action is taken to speed up bus journey times and encourage more people to travel by bus.

This warning has come from David Leeder, a former director of National Express Group and FirstGroup, in an article in *BUSES* magazine. Leeder, co-founder of Transport Investment Ltd (TIL), writes that TfL is "drifting back towards a model that relies on rising Treasury handouts to keep an ever-shrinking network going - a policy that was tested to destruction in the 1970s and 80s".

Leeder argues that the on-going decline of London's bus network "seems to have gone largely unnoticed by many commentators and politicians" - instead there are frequent calls in other UK cities for their citizens to enjoy a "London-style" bus network.

London's bus network is suffering from rising costs and falling passenger numbers - but Leeder argues that these trends are the result of TfL's own policies.

Over the past decade or more, Leeder says that TfL has prioritised cycle schemes, rail improvements and air quality, "and apparently given up on 'reasons to travel' marketing".

A plethora of new pedestrian schemes and "often empty" cycle lanes have led to "extreme loss of junction capacity, selective removal of bus lanes, and huge reductions in bus speeds".

As bus speeds fall, operating costs have risen and patronage has fallen - a vicious cycle that is very familiar to bus operators.

At the same time, TfL's rail schemes, including the Elizabeth Line, and post-Covid changes in travel behaviour, have released considerable capacity on previously overcrowded tube lines, providing bus users with alternative options.

Leeder, who lives in inner east London, writes: "My local Route 15 illustrates the problems with TfL's strategy. The frequency has been drastically cut. At Aldgate the route makes a long, slow diversion, even though the bus stops outside Aldgate East station have been removed to make way for cycle lanes. In Lower Thames Street, it is quite common to wait 10-15 minutes to make the left



## MOVING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION

In his article, David Leeder highlights a few facts about London's buses:

- London bus demand peaked in 2014. After a decade of decline, patronage has returned to 2005 levels
- This is despite London's population growing by 1.2 million people (14%) over the same period.
- As a result, bus trips per head of population per year have dropped by almost a quarter (circa 24%) in London.
- The subsidy in 2014 was £547m (23p per trip). By 2023 it was £786m (45p per trip) - an increase of around 95%.
- In response, TfL has so far cut the network by around 1,000 buses (10%) since 2017, by thinning frequencies and removing entire routes (especially in the central areas).

turn near the Tower, which has been largely given over to a lightly used 'cycle superhighway'."

He adds: "TfL seems to no longer have any systematic idea who buses (or roads) are for: the revealed policy seems to be to disadvantage low income workers, or the infirm, so that the 'Lycra Louts' employed by investment banks can race back home to St John's Wood while the buses stand in traffic. And forget any discretionary growth in bus use at these speeds.

"One may deduce that some parts of TfL management are aware of this contradiction, but the all-party elite consensus of 'Two Wheels Good, Four Wheels Bad' makes any public discussion of the difficult trade-offs inherent in allocating scarce road space very hard."

If the current strategies and trends are maintained, Leeder warns that TfL's bus deficit could easily increase by 4-6% per annum (for example, with 3% higher costs plus 3% lower revenue).

Instead, he proposes that TfL adopts a more subtle balance in the allocation of road space. He argues that London would benefit from Brighton-style speeds (and marketing), or Paris-style segregated bus routes.

Leon Daniels, who was managing director surface transport at TfL from 2011 until 2017, agrees that action is required to speed up bus speeds in London.

He told *Passenger Transport*: "There is no doubt a combination of circumstances have led to worsening bus speeds and a consequent reduction in the attractiveness of the bus network. This is especially true where it is indeed now sometimes quicker to walk. Significant action is now needed across the network to improve bus speeds." ■