Bus priority

Top lines

- Congestion increases bus journey times and reduces journey reliability, both of which reduce passenger numbers
- Congestion increases running costs, which reduces operators' ability to reinvest in service improvements
- Bus priority measures which move buses out of congestion can increase passenger numbers and deliver significant economic, environmental and health benefits

Background information

Buses can play a key role in delivering economic growth, significant environmental benefits and improving our health and wellbeing. One of the primary challenges facing the bus industry is congestion. During the pandemic we saw a significant reduction in traffic numbers which in turn resulted in increased journey speeds and reduced emissions. At the height of lockdown Manchester reported a 70% reduction in nitrogen dioxide emissions.

We know that journey times are a key reason that people choose not to travel by bus and high levels of
congestion is a significant contributor to increased bus journey times. This negatively impacts journey reliability and further reduces passenger numbers as they seek an alternative travel option. Research by Greener Journeys found that nearly a quarter of car users would consider switching to the bus if journey times were quicker and more reliable.[1] Congestion also significantly increases operators' running costs, reducing funds available to reinvest in improving the network for passengers, for example through improved bus frequency.

The introduction of bus priority measures can drastically improve journey times and reliability, which will result in increased passenger numbers, reduced pollution and a bus network that is continuously improving. Bus priority can take many forms, small to large and include bus priority at junctions and traffic lights, bus only roads and lanes and park and ride schemes.

Figures and statistics

- A study has shown that a £1.2 billion investment in bus priority will deliver £6 billion of benefits including[2]

[1] Greener Journeys (July 2018) greenerjourneys.com/news/ditch-the-car-this-catch-the-bus-week/
[2] KPMG (June 2017) The 'true value' of local bus services: A report to Greener Journeys 2017

- £2.3 billion in direct benefits to passengers – quicker and more reliable bus journeys
- £2 billion through improved access to jobs – quicker journeys increases access to other jobs further away
- £700 million in public health benefits – the average bus user walks 20 minutes as part of their commute
- £440 million in improved air quality and reduced carbon emissions – less congestion on our roads
- £420 million in other benefits such as increase volunteering – the public has more time to partake in other activities

- A 10% decrease in bus speeds increase bus operating costs by £400 million per year. This could be reinvested in improving services for passengers
- The economic cost of congestion is £11 billion a year in urban areas in England[3]

Case Study- In 2014 a bus service which ran between Oxford City and Blackbird Leys would take 72 minutes to do a complete round trip and took 9 buses to deliver an 8 minute frequency. Due to increased levels of congestion, the same trip now takes 88 minutes and requires 2 additional buses to deliver the same frequency, costing an extra £320,000 per year to run. This money could be reinvested into further improving the bus service for passengers or purchasing zero emission buses.

What needs to happen

1. **Introduce bus priority measures to put buses first on our road network and improve journey times and reliability.**

   Local authorities will be able to access funding for bus priority measures through the Bus Service Improvement Plan process, as set out in the Government's National Bus Strategy. Bus priority is more than adding new bus lanes and takes many forms, examples include;

   - **Bus given priority at junctions and traffic lights** will improve bus reliability and journey times, encouraging more passengers on board.

   - **Bus only roads** provide a direct travel option straight to the city centre, which creates a cleaner, safer and more desirable environment, reduces the need for parking spaces and boosts the town centre economy.

   - **Bus only lanes** deliver better traffic flows throughout the city which decreases journey times for all road users.

[3] Greener Journeys (July 2012) *Buses and Economic Growth: Summary of a Report by the University of Leeds, Institute for Transport Studies*

- **Park and Ride Schemes** enable passengers to park their cars outside of the city centre, and continue their commute on a bus. This reduces congestion and improve journeys times whilst also reducing pollution levels.

Successful bus priority schemes have been shown to increase passenger numbers by reversing the negative impact increasing levels of congestion has on the frequency and reliability of bus services demonstrated above.

Connecting Leeds - Leeds transport strategy sets out the ambition to be a city where car travel is not required and a target to double bus patronage over the next 10 years from 2016 levels. To achieve this the plan includes creating a new high frequency bus network with over 90% of bus services running every 10 minutes between 7am and 8pm and increasing the capacity at their park and ride hubs with 2,000 additional spaces.

Reading Bus Priority measures – Reading has the second highest level of bus user per head of population outside of London and has recorded consistent patronage growth in recent years when compared to the national average. Reading has implemented multiple bus priority measures on its roads including dedicated bus links and access, contraflow bus lanes which enable buses to run in both directions, traffic light priority, bus-only gates, width restrictions and dedicated access to the very busy Black Boy Roundabout.