

A Transport Policy for London

By Simon Fawthrop

Introduction

At the moment the transport system is used to deal with the symptoms of Congestion rather than the cause of Congestion. The symptoms are that more and more people wish to travel into central London between the hours of 7.30am and 9.30 am and the same people wish to then travel home again between 4.30pm and 6.30pm. The symptoms are over congestion on, trains, tubes, buses, roads and pavements at these times of day.

To put this in context back in the 1950s (1951 Census) London had a population 1.2 Million higher than it is today and yet congestion was less. The main differences between then and now are as follows:-

- (i) More housewives who stayed at home.
- (ii) Many people worked in local manufacturing jobs (less distance travelled to work)
- (iii) Less car ownership
- (iv) Less people in employment
- (v) More rigid employment (i.e. half day closing and Sunday closing)

The problem of congestion has therefore been exacerbated by London's success. The aspirations of its residents, such as home ownership, have increased exponentially - the result being that more people have had to work to own a home. For couples wishing to own a property this is even harder assuming a home is priced at £275,000 to afford a mortgage would require a joint income of £55,000 per year (based on 5 times earnings). This would be £92,000 for 3 times the salary. The effect of this is that it now rarely falls on a single earner to purchase a property. The basic rule is that "More people in work equals more congestion" - this is hardly rocket science.

Communities First

When faced with the choice of investing in buses or investing in People, my Communities First policy invests in people. It does this for two reasons:- The first is that it makes sense to invest in people because of the benefits it brings to London and its economy, but also it brings benefits to the individuals that make up Greater London's varied Communities.

The second is that it invests in our Communities, as it helps to build a sense of identity and neighbourliness, all of which is important to my Communities First policy.

Encouraging Working from Home and Changes to Planning Policies

By investing in the people of Greater London the policy will tackle the need for travel by encouraging businesses to utilise the available technologies so that more of their employees can work from home. Businesses that trust their employees, as I do the electorate, will find the benefits very rewarding. This may not sound much, but most people have very little desire to commute every day across Greater London and risk being delayed because of Congestion or a failure on their particular transport route to work. The more that people can be encouraged to work from home the better it is not only for the congestion and transport of Greater London, but also for the individuals that would otherwise travel.

I'm not suggesting that this would be compulsory, or that it would be suitable for every individual or every business. The question does have to be asked how many journeys are essential. My aim would be to encourage 20% of current commuters to be able to work from home within 4 years. The effect would be to see a reduction in the number of people using public transport and private transport at peak times.

The benefits do not stop there, individuals that do not have to suffer the stress of a commute to work, will be more relaxed and more productive for their companies. They will have more quality and leisure time to spend with families and friends. The knock on effect on local economies and small shops can only be positive. People working from home will also deter crime such as burglary and vandalism and the individuals may even get to know their neighbours, making for a safer, stronger local community.

I do recognise that this approach will not happen over night, but rather than taking the current Mayor's approach of watching and penalising people as they go about their daily business, My Communities First policy is one that sets people free to get involved in their communities and give back choice over how they spend the time saved by not commuting.

In addition I would change the focus of planning policy so that there is encouragement to develop business premises in local areas so as to provide local employment, rather than try to concentrate these in central London or regional centres, which is the current policy. Developing vibrant local communities is the best way forward rather than the encouragement of long distance commuting.



Typical ADSL Router, used to connect homes to the internet to enable people to work from Home.

I have outlined my approach in other areas of transport below.

Existing Transport Problems in London

London has some of the worst transport congestion in the world both on the roads and in terms of overcrowding on underground and main line trains. In addition, it has some of the most expensive public transport (for the few that pay), and possibly the worst air pollution of any major city. How have the policies over the last few years tackled these problems?

In essence the approach has been a high cost one, with a large central bureaucracy (Transport for London – TfL), an emphasis on grandiose major projects, and a central dictatorship whose one size fits all approach overrules the views of local boroughs and the general public.

The Mayor and TfL have a reputation for avoiding public consultation – for example, the lack of a referendum or public inquiry on the Congestion Charge system, the Low Emission Zone proposals (LEZ), on new tram systems (Cross River Tram and the extension of the Croydon Tramlink) and other large schemes. On minor schemes, there is often minimal public consultation, if any. And even when there is widespread public consultation, for example on the western extension of the Congestion Charge scheme where there was clear opposition, the results are often ignored.

The lack of democratic input to the decision making process, and the lack of financial accountability of TfL and the Mayor, have resulted in a large waste of resources and policies that are often framed to please a small minority of the electorate to the disadvantage of the majority.

How to improve matters is the question? Below I set out a policy framework that I believe would tackle the transport problems of London in a more cost effective and more democratic way.

Democracy versus Dictatorship

Clearly there is a need for a central policy co-ordination, planning and funding authority for transport in London. Major projects such as Crossrail simply could not get off the ground unless some central body was organising and promoting them. And the road network includes many strategic routes that run through more than one borough. In the past the independence of the thirty-three London boroughs has obstructed many major schemes and with such a diversity of political views in these boroughs and a tendency to "nimbyism", it can be difficult to get a consensus on anything. This creates enormous problems for a major commercial centre and "world city" such as London. It also results in inconvenience for local residents - a typical example is the enforcement of parking regulations where the regimes in adjacent boroughs may be very different so people do not know what might apply or what penalties they risk.

But we seem to have swung from one extreme to the other. Now we have TfL dictating how road safety and traffic management schemes should be implemented down to the last detail – if TfL don't like what local boroughs are doing they simply do not grant the funds. They also require numerous bureaucratic reports and plans (e.g. Local Transport Implementation Plans), which are subject to their veto or even rewriting, when they may not be aware of local road conditions or other local issues. They do not take account of the differences between London boroughs which are large – a central London borough such as Westminster or Southwark, is very different to an outer London borough such as Bromley, where I live. The amount of congestion varies, the level of public transport supply varies, commuting distances vary and even cycling is affected by whether there are hills or not in the borough.

My proposals would therefore be that in future Transport for London and the Mayor should:

A – Retain a policy development and major project planning function (major projects being those that affect more than one borough) but that such policies and plans be subject to the consent of London boroughs (via the London Councils organisation), and budgets be subject to the approval of the Greater London Assembly (by a simple majority). In addition that any major projects be subject to public referendum by all those people likely to be affected; and

B – Delegate all local implementation of policies to the local boroughs and that TfL have no responsibility for the allocation of funding for local traffic management schemes but that the allocation of funding for such schemes be based on a formula based on various parameters related to the geographic aspects and transport volumes within each borough.

This would re-introduce much needed democratic control over the use of resources and expenditure on transport projects.

Free Public Transport

In my view, those who use a particular transport system, should pay a reasonable proportion of the cost of its provision. There are no “free lunches” in the transport world as providing transport infrastructure is always expensive. Public transport should be for all, not just for free-loaders.

One issue that must be faced in terms of the economic cost of transport in London is the current level of subsidies to various transport systems, and the individual subsidies to users. Encouraging the use of public transport by subsidies, particularly when investment in major new projects is required, can help to reduce the congestion on the road network, when the latter is very difficult to expand. Clearly when the load factors are likely to be high enough to make operating public transport such as buses, trains or underground systems to be profitable, then such networks should be developed. But the Mayor seems to have tried to defy the laws of economics and common sense in that totally free travel encourages excessive use (and odd thing to do when the network is now so busy) while the recipients of the benefit rarely appreciate the cost.

Everyone has welcomed the improvements in bus services in the capital in recent years. But we now have a situation where bus subsidies are running at more than a £1 billion per year, while load factors on many routes are relatively low. In addition free travel is provided to those over 60, to schoolchildren and to other groups. Although some subsidy to the elderly can encourage off-peak travel when the network is under-utilised, in reality many of them could afford to pay full fare and also receive other state benefits to cover the cost of essential travel. Such “Freedom Passes” are now a major cost problem for local boroughs and has led to rises in local taxes and over-zealous enforcement of parking and minor traffic infringement to try and raise the necessary revenue. In the case of schoolchildren, free travel anywhere at any time seems to have encouraged vandalism and the migration of gangs from one area of London to another, where they feel there is less monitoring and more opportunities for misbehaviour. I would restrict both these benefits to people who really needed them – for example to schoolchildren only on trips to and from school.

Congestion Charging



The London Congestion Charge was the first major experiment in road pricing by any major city. Although it has reduced traffic in a small area to some extent (but traffic speeds are falling again and are likely to fall further after the Western extension), it has not had any environmental benefits and the amount of cash it raises to finance public transport is relatively small. A very large proportion of the revenue raised is spent on operating the system, making it one of the least efficient taxes, and the improvement in bus services in London has primarily come from general taxation – the contribution from the congestion charging system is comparatively little.

The views of the public on the Congestion Charge are polarised to some extent with many central London residents who do not own cars or have a residents discount welcoming it, while outer borough residents who are most affected by it are opposed. There is little rational debate on its merits, or possible alternatives. Dismantling the existing system would no doubt be costly though.

My proposal would be to put in place a commission to review the operation of the existing system, and particularly to review its economics. In addition it should consider various possible alternatives to the current “boundary” system enforced by cameras to see if other alternatives that are cheaper to operate, more flexible and more convenient for users can be

identified. Such issues as variable charges based on the level of congestion, or possibly only charges at certain times of day should also be considered. Any proposals for changes would be put out to public consultation, and preferably a referendum. No extension to other areas, or other road tolls, in London would be proceeded with (for example, Greenwich and the Blackwall Tunnel) before this process had been completed.

Note that congestion is usually self regulating in the sense that if it gets too bad, people stop travelling or delay their trips to a better time. In London there is such an “unsatisfied demand” for travel, whether on the roads or public transport, that minor tinkering with congestion levels or providing financial incentives to change behaviour is typically not very productive. As we saw with the Congestion Charge, other vehicles just replaced private cars, with little net benefit, and there are lots of other unintended consequences that result from trying to change people’s behaviour.

Below I will try and deal with specific issues on each transport mode.

Buses



As mentioned above, subsidies to buses seem to have grown to excessive levels and we now have a situation where few bus passengers actually pay a fare on many routes. With poor passenger load levels at some times, the economics of bus operations in real terms have been falling. In addition the very large number of buses and the use of the very large “bendy buses” have contributed to worse traffic congestion. Bendy buses should certainly be subject to review because they appear to have a much worse safety record.

The increase in the number of buses, which typically use large and often “dirty” diesel engines, is probably also why the reduction in traffic from the Congestion Charge has not resulted in any reduction in air pollution within the congestion charge zone. I would push ahead with the use of hybrid, fuel cell powered or electric vehicles to try and improve their environmental impact.

Bus lanes are a contentious subject that I would review. Although I have no objection to the provision of bus lanes where there is sufficient room so as to ensure a timely and reliable bus service, I am concerned when one public group has preference to another in terms of the provision of public owned space (namely road space). Some bus lanes create much worse congestion for other road users, while not actually carrying many vehicles. Surely all people should be treated equally whether they are car or bus users, or pedestrians?

London Underground



Improvements to the London Underground network are clearly essential if it is to cope with the increased usage seen in recent years and the growth in the business and population of London. It also needs many improvements to stations, rolling stock, ventilation and safety and all of these need substantial investment. The Mayor seems to have failed to agree with central Government how they might be financed but I believe a more co-operative approach should be taken. I would certainly like to expedite the improvement in the network and expand it to some parts of London which are not currently covered.

Surface Rail

The national rail network clearly supports much of the commuter traffic into central London from the suburbs and from outside London. But it has reached the limit of its capacity on many routes, resulting in severe overcrowding and “standing room only” on my lines in the rush hours.

Overcrowding is both uncomfortable and a major safety risk. Apart from encouraging the effort to introduce longer trains and longer platforms, I suspect there is not much more can be done to increase capacity so other systems must be looked at.



It is worth mentioning the Crossrail project at this point. This would clearly expand the capacity of the east-west route and support regeneration of some parts of East London. However, this is a very expensive project and my feeling is that it is yet another grandiose scheme from the Mayor where the economics are ultimately quite poor. I would review this project to see if it made more sense to introduce smaller scale or alternative transport systems to increase the capacity in the required areas.

Trams and Light Rail



Light rail systems which run on their own independent tracks, such as the Docklands Light Railway (DLR) I am totally in favour of. The DLR scheme is one of the few such networks which appear to make an operating profit. Unfortunately there are few opportunities to build new systems of this kind in London because of the difficulty of obtaining the required surface land.

Trams are very popular with the public, particularly the elderly who worry about being “thrown about” in buses. But they have typically not reached their budgeted economic objectives and run at an operating loss (even after extensive public subsidies). National Government has therefore become increasingly wary of funding such schemes. In addition trams that run on the street have a safety problem (more accidents to pedestrians than buses) and typically create more traffic congestion. The Croydon Tramlink was the first modern tram system to be installed in London and had the advantage that much of the route was “off-street”. Although it has allegedly got some people to use public transport rather than their cars, in reality most users are former bus passengers. Usage is much lower than was forecast and it will never recoup the capital cost. For this system I would attempt to try and improve volumes by limited extensions of the network, but the economic viability must be carefully studied, while TfL seem to be ploughing ahead regardless.

For other proposed tram systems, such as the West London Tram – which has been strongly opposed by local residents, and the Cross River Tram – another system that will run mainly “on-street”, I think these need much more careful review than has been undertaken to date, and proper public consultation.

With these kind of systems, one has to consider carefully whether it would not be better to improve the bus network, or provide “guided buses” or even electric trolley buses, on some routes. These are typically lower cost, and more flexible in many regards than trams. With limited funds available, a more careful selection of the most economically viable solutions could save Londoners an enormous amount of money, when many of them are concerned about rising taxes.

Cycling and Walking

I totally support the encouragement of a more healthy lifestyle by the promotion of cycling and walking. Pedestrian routes can be improved, and separation from motor vehicles is important (the traditional congested “high streets” and “main roads” of some London suburbs are some of the most difficult roads in terms of road safety problems).

Pedestrianisation of shopping areas is welcomed by most people, so long as car parking and public transport access is available within reasonable distance, although clearly it can cause some problems for disabled people. A good standard of urban planning is essential to promote high quality results and this is an area where a central body such as TfL can act to promote good standards by education and demonstration.

As regards cycling, again I support the development of cycle routes, although I am sceptical of the benefit of "on-street" cycle lanes. The cost of the "London Cycle Network" has been very high, and it has been implemented in the usual dogmatic way by TfL. But cyclists often question the benefit of such lanes and motorists tend to ignore them (and "enforcement" is not very practical). But the encouragement of cycling by the provision of secure parking facilities at stations, offices, shops, schools and other facilities would definitely be worth promoting.

But one has to be wary about the impact on road accident statistics of increased cycling, particularly by schoolchildren so I suggest that in respect of the latter that one has to provide alternatives (such as school buses mentioned below) and good road safety education programmes.

Road Transport



Clearly the road network in London is insufficient to cope with the volume of private cars and goods vehicles in the modern age and the latter are likely to increase in number as business expands and there are more home deliveries from internet shopping. Most people accept that private cars have significant environmental impact (but see below on air pollution issues) and that it is not possible to substantially expand the road network in London – there simply is not land space to do so at reasonable cost.

But private cars are still the most used mode of transport for many people, and are essential for those in the outer suburbs or for many leisure activities in the evening and at weekends. They also provide convenience and comfort which many people are unwilling to swap for the perceived dangers of public transport. We therefore need to learn to live with the motor car and accommodate it within the transport framework of London, rather than pursue the generally "anti-car" policies of TfL and the current Mayor.

My approach would be to try and relieve traffic congestion wherever possible, and I am not opposed to new road building where practical. But even simple improvements to junctions can be very effective at reducing congestion. The policies of TfL of introducing more traffic lights, extended phasing of pedestrian segments at junction lights and for pedestrian crossings, the re-allocation of road space to wider pavements (often unnecessarily in many cases) and to bus lanes, has often worsened congestion considerably to the disadvantage of the car user. Such issues need to be examined with a less dogmatic prejudice in favour of one group of the public as against another. Many traffic calming and road safety schemes have also worsened congestion with only very minor or nil safety benefits – even the recent decision on the Blackwall Tunnel Tidal Flow system (a good example of TfL's propensity not to consult) seems to have been taken without any study of the cost/benefit ratio or the historic accident record.

One area that could be improved substantially to reduce congestion is road works. There should be a much tougher approach to restricting road works during the day and ensuring that they are expeditiously completed. This particularly applies to major routes.

Parking Policies and Traffic Enforcement

Parking policies are another aspect of the Mayor's transport policies that I would reconsider. The provision of adequate off-street parking can assist road safety, improves the appearance of the environment and when provided near public transport facilities such as train stations, encourages the use of public transport. Inadequate provision, for example in new housing developments, simply degrades the environment and causes inconvenience to car drivers. Although some general policies in this area may be wise, it should be for local boroughs to decide what is or is not appropriate in respect of parking matters.

But the use of aggressive parking enforcement regimes and the automated monitoring of bus lanes, yellow box junctions and parking by cameras so as to generate large amounts of revenue to local boroughs should be halted. At present most of the victims of these systems are normally law abiding citizens who have made an innocent mistake, while they provide a strong incentive for the lawless to falsely register their vehicles and avoid both taxes and fines. In general, parking charges should only cover the cost of the provision, administration and enforcement of parking provisions, and should not be used to cross-subsidise other activities. Neither should local authorities set targets for parking fines for parking enforcement operators – any targets should be based on infringement levels, not numbers of fines.

Air Transport



London is a major international transport hub for air traffic, with four major airports within or serving the conurbation. I do not wish to see their dominant business position eroded, but they do create major environmental problems in regards to air pollution and noise. Although aircraft have become quieter over the years, the increased frequency of flights and larger "stacks" that result has meant that noise is affecting more and more Londoners. I would support proposals to restrict night flights more severely to alleviate the worse effects.

In addition I would look very carefully at the demands to expand the capacity and throughput of Heathrow. Simply on environmental grounds, we may have to consider other alternatives or restrictions on the volumes of flights. Although this may be more a matter of national policy than the Mayor of London's, it is such an important issue that I would try and take the lead on this matter.

Air Pollution

Improving air quality in London is clearly a major priority. Apart from the issue of CO2 emissions, there are many more dangerous pollutants on which London does not meet international health standards. Fortunately, vehicle technology is moving forward by leaps and bounds so that most new cars, LGVs and HGVs are much improved over older vehicles. In fact, air pollution levels will fall substantially in the next few years as older vehicles are scrapped and replaced by new ones.

The encouragement of “upgrading” to new vehicles would therefore be part of my policies. Likewise the replacement of older taxis and buses, or their engines, which are also major contributors in central London to air pollution, is also a high priority.

Commercial vehicles, specifically heavy diesel powered ones, are of particular concern though as diesel vehicles emit more particulates and cancer inducing chemicals. The proposed LEZ in London, with large “penalties” on older such vehicles and an expensive camera enforcement system, was probably unnecessary however. With a few exceptions, the vehicles concerned will be scrapped anyway in a few years time. It’s much better to use a carrot approach rather than a stick to persuade such vehicle owners to upgrade sooner.

As Mayor I would take the lead in promoting the use of low emission vehicles, particularly for public service vehicles, buses and taxis. I would also encourage the provision of electric vehicle recharging facilities, reduced cost parking for low emission vehicles and other similar policies. However, penalising the owners of larger or older vehicles, out of proportion to the extra pollution they emit, is unreasonable when they already have strong incentives from road tax and petrol costs to switch to more efficient vehicles. And I am not in favour of CO2 based permit parking schemes or a graduated congestion charge – these are simply examples of “gesture politics” which are administratively complex and which have little benefit in practice.

Improving the flow of traffic and tackling traffic congestion would also help to reduce road traffic emissions. But reducing private car use alone, by for example making public transport more attractive, is unlikely to help much at all to reduce emissions. Transport use is driven by the general economy and switching modes has little impact on total emissions.

It’s worth pointing out that tackling vehicle emissions, and particularly those from private cars (the latter only represent 10% of all CO2 emissions for example) is only one required component of any policy to reduce emissions and other areas such as those from homes, office buildings and industrial premises need to be tackled just as vigorously.

Road Safety

Everyone wants to reduce the number of deaths and injuries on our roads. But there are no simplistic solutions. In reality the number of road deaths has barely been falling in recent years in London despite millions being spent on speed humps, speed cameras and other “traffic calming” measures. Although non-fatal injuries have been falling, those statistics are now being questioned as hospital admission figures indicate doubts about their accuracy. Also much of the benefit probably arises from improvements in in-car safety, and the tendency for school-children to be taken to school by car with lower levels of walking and cycling in the population in general (per mile travelled, car travel is much safer than other modes).

Some London boroughs, such as my own in Bromley, have a better road accident reduction record than the average even though they have banned speed humps and dislike speed cameras. So, one has to come to the conclusion that there are other measures that are better. A close attention to the cost-effectiveness of different road safety projects, rather than a dogmatic or simplistic approach seems to be most effective in reducing accidents. A proper analysis of accident statistics, combined with local knowledge of the road conditions and layout, can be most effective at cutting accidents. This is very different to the approach of TfL who seem to believe in a “one size fits all” set of policies – and these policies are generally misconceived.

A significant investment in education programmes, particularly for schoolchildren and young drivers and motorcyclists, is something I consider very important. Such programmes have been shown to be very effective in some boroughs, but they tend to be unglamorous in nature and therefore often do not get the support of TfL. This should be changed.

TfL and the Mayor have a role to play in road improvement schemes and education programmes because they can ensure that “best practice” is promoted and knowledge interchanged between local authority traffic engineers, but it is surely best for the local boroughs to implement them.

Note that well designed traffic engineering schemes can both improve road safety as well as reduce traffic congestion while at the same time improving the environmental appearance.

Another example of possible combined benefits would be the introduction of school buses – this would reduce traffic on the “school run” – one of the major problems in London – while at the same time providing a safe and secure trip for school pupils. Expenditure on such provision, and some operating subsidies, might be more cost effective than many of the grandiose schemes that the current Mayor currently pours money into.

Use of the River Thames

Incredibly all politicians and political parties at some stage seem to have promoted greater use of the River Thames as part of a transport policy. Whilst to encourage and promote the use of the river is a good aim, uses such as a Thames Bus would not necessarily be viable. In terms of an overall transport policy I will remove any barriers to encouraging such a scheme and ensure that the Oyster Card will be accepted on any proposed schemes.



Conclusion

In essence, London's transport system needs more capacity or less people using it. I hope I have shown where expenditure can be most effective in improving the capacity, while still improving the environmental situation. A cost-effective transport and environmental policy is what London needs – with many small scale projects and initiatives, not grandiose white elephants that is what we tend to have got from the current Mayor.

And more democratic input and local decision making would ensure more practicality and less waste on the details of new schemes.

To summarise, my policies would concentrate on:

A – Tackling congestion by looking at the root causes, not additionally penalising people with extra charges who suffer from it.

B – Reforming the decision making process and budgetary control of transport expenditure in London so that people get more say in what is done, and how the money is spent. More support to and involvement of local communities is essential.

C – Using the income available to the Mayor and Transport for London more cost effectively with more emphasis on smaller scale projects.

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