

## **The role of the bus in society.**

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### **Why buses are important.**

Whilst the majority of trips are made by car (about 61% in 2019) and only about 5% are by bus (Department for Transport, 2022a), buses are important for several reasons:

- Firstly, some people on low incomes and some elderly people, do not have an alternative for trips that are too long to walk or involve carrying heavy shopping.
- Secondly, buses are very convenient. 94% of the population live within five minutes' walk of a bus stop. In contrast, only 3% live within 5 minutes' walk of a railway station (Department for Transport, 2022a).
- Thirdly, we all need buses at some stage in our lives.

### **Bus use through the life cycle.**

Many people will have used the bus to travel to school, meet friends and start establishing independence from their parents. After that, they start careers and have families. As part of that process many people learn to drive and buy cars, if only because it is pretty difficult to take children to all the places they need to go to, without a car nowadays. But then as we get older, we become less able to get out and about and our faculties start to fail – we cannot see so well, we cannot hear so well, we might start to get muddled in our thinking. We may decide to avoid certain car journeys such as driving at night and in congested areas. We may find that we have to give up driving all together. Then what do we do? We have to use buses. We may be fortunate enough to have a bus pass. We may become very dependent on buses if we want to maintain our independence and enjoy life and contribute to society.

### **Buses are essential for some people.**

Some people may not be so fortunate and not be able to afford cars and so are dependent on public transport all their lives, for their shopping, taking children to school, getting to the doctor's and meeting friends. Those on the lowest income make over twice as many bus trips per head as wealthy people (Department for Transport, 2022a). For many of those journeys, the bus is essential. Taxis are expensive and many trips involve carrying goods such as shopping.

### **Use by older people.**

Older people contribute significantly to the economy, much more than they cost, as shown a few years ago in the report by the Royal Voluntary Service 'Gold Age Pensioners' (WRVS, 2011). Much of this contribution is through voluntary work, both formal, for example, at hospitals and informal, for example, looking after grandchildren so that parents can both go out to work. Much of this relies on the older people being able to travel by bus.

### **Loneliness.**

For some people, the bus journey itself can provide a vital service. There are many people living alone whose only contact with other people on some days may be the bus driver and their fellow passengers. There are examples on the internet of pensioners who ride on buses all day to keep warm (The Guardian, 2022).

### **London compared with rural areas.**

There are major differences between London and the rest of the country. 97% of the population in large conurbations live within five minutes of a bus stop, but only 75% in very rural areas (Department for Transport, 2022a). It should not be forgotten that our national policymakers are based in London, and probably do not use buses very much, especially in rural areas. If you look at the number of buses going up and down Whitehall or round Parliament Square in London, there are plenty of buses and this may well be the image that many politicians have. In rural areas that may be only a few buses a week, and they may be on very long tortuous routes, not very punctual, and subject to cancellations. In some research we did a few years ago, talking to a group of older and disabled people, one of their concerns was that, even if they caught a bus to somewhere, they could not be certain that there would be a bus to take them home.

### **Bus service reductions.**

A major problem is the reduction in bus services especially in rural areas. Bus services have deteriorated over the years. In the last ten years there was a loss of almost 5,000 bus routes and decline of 27% in bus vehicle miles, according to the Campaign for Better Transport (2022).

### **Fares**

Another difference between London and elsewhere is fares. The standard adult fare in London is £1.65 with a daily cap of £4.95, so that is the most you will pay to travel all day by bus in London (Transport for London, 2022). The average single fare for a 3-mile journey is estimated at over £2.80, and some fares cost nearly £6. On Saturday 3 September 2022, the Department for Transport announced that there would be a £2 cap on single bus journeys from January to March 2023 (Department for Transport, 2022b). If this is well publicised and the effects are monitored these could lead to an increase in patronage, which means that it may become self-funding and remain permanently.

### **Concessionary bus passes for older people.**

In England, when you reach the state pension age which is now 65 for men and women, you are entitled to a pass giving you free travel after 9.30 am Monday to Friday up to 11.00 pm and all

day at the weekend and on bank holidays. In some areas there may be extra concessions. For example, in Hertfordshire you can travel free on buses any time on Monday to Friday. Whilst free bus passes have been around in some areas for many years, the English National Concessionary pass was introduced by Gordon Brown when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer in the late 1990s. It was introduced as a social policy not as a transport policy. The purpose was to improve the quality of life of older people (Mackett, 2014). 67% of eligible pensioners hold a concessionary bus pass because of their age (Department for Transport, 2022a). Given that the passes are free and are easy to obtain, you might wonder why more people do not have them. Research shows that there are two related reasons: they have a car that they can use, and they do not have any buses. This figure seems to be decreasing slowly, but it is not clear why: probably the pandemic and the associated decrease in the number of bus services.

### **Concessionary bus passes for disabled people.**

Another group entitled to free bus travel is disabled people. There are 0.9 million bus passes issued on the grounds of disability, compared with 8 million on the grounds of age (Department for Transport, 2021a), but we do not know what proportion of disabled people have one. This is because many people become disabled after reaching the state pension age and have an age-related one. It is likely that about 10% of disabled people below state pension age have one. This is much lower than the proportion of people who have one because of their age. Why is this? Because it is very straightforward to determine eligibility on the grounds of age but much more difficult on the grounds of disability. You are entitled to have a disabled bus pass if you cannot walk, are blind, deaf or dumb, have a learning disability, or a long-term condition such as epilepsy or severe mental illness. You have to be able to prove your eligibility. This is straightforward for some disabilities, but not for some non-visible ones. You have to be able to show that you would be refused a licence to drive a car. Anecdotally, we know some people have given up trying to get one because it is so difficult. Curiously, if you are deaf, you are automatically eligible for a free bus pass. But you are also allowed to drive.

### **Physical barriers to bus use.**

Lots has been done to address some of the physical barriers to bus travel. here. Low-floor buses have been a great success. In London and many other parts of the country, all the buses have flat floors, making access much easier for everybody, including people in wheelchairs. These buses are also fitted with ramps to enable people in wheelchairs to board easily. These buses have a space for wheelchairs but there can be conflicts with others already using the space, such as people with luggage or parents with children in pushchairs. The wheelchair user has priority. However, if another passenger refuses to vacate the space when required to do so, the driver has to resolve the conflict which can be difficult. There can be difficulties reaching the bus stop because of poorly maintained pavements, lack of dropped curbs and so on.

### **Improvements to buses.**

As well as introducing low floor buses, other improvements to buses mean that 49% of buses in England have audio-visual displays inside (97% in London and 30% in non-metropolitan districts),

95% have CCTV (99% in London, 90% in non-metropolitan districts), and 38% have free wi-fi (1% in London, 35% in non-metropolitan districts). Wi-fi can be useful for some mobile phone apps to assist some people with disabilities such as indicating when the passenger's bus stop is the next one (Department for Transport, 2021a).

### **Driver training.**

Another area where there have been improvements is driver training. 96% of operators require drivers to be trained in disability awareness and 100% of all drivers and on bus staff are trained in disability awareness (Department for Transport, 2021a). That last figure is surprisingly high. Some training is online, and watching a video, does not necessarily mean that you have taken it all in.

### **Mental health and bus travel**

Turning to another form of disability: having a mental health condition. About 20% of the population currently have a diagnosis of a mental health condition, and many more have a condition without a formal diagnosis (Bridges, 2015).

An on-line survey of people with mental health conditions was conducted in the Summer of 2018 (Mackett, 2019, 2021 a, b, c, d). There were with 363 responses used for statistical analysis. Many organizations provided assistance with the survey, including Bus Users UK.

Nearly all respondents had anxiety issues which affects concentration and self-confidence, and about three quarters had depression which can affect the ability to make decisions.

30% of the respondents could not use the bus because of their mental health condition. Some examples of the difficulties that some of them had using buses are shown below.

- Some people find using buses confusing: a man in his 50s said *"I have chosen to walk rather than to use buses as I struggle with the anxiety of not being able to understand the ticketing/timetable requirements on buses"*.
- A woman in her 40s said that she could only get off when another person did: *"So anxious that I couldn't get off the bus. If no one else is getting off at my stop, I have to wait and get off when someone else does. This means walking back a long way"*.
- Another cause of anxiety was buses being diverted off their normal route. For example, *"The bus took a diversion. I was stressed. I tried to blank the outside out. I kept trying to reassure myself it will be back to normal soon. I missed my stop. I was so stressed and confused"* (Woman in her 20s).
- For some people, interacting with the driver caused problems. For example, *"I struggle with buses as you generally have to interact with the driver"* (Woman in her 30s).
- The attitudes of other travellers can cause distress, such as *"Being surrounded by strangers, thinking that they are judging me on the bus"* (Person with no age given).
- People can be made to feel anxious by bad behaviour by others even if it is not directed towards them: *"Just the other week, some of the other bus users were inconsiderate,*

*abusive to each other, shouting and swearing etc. One lady's comments to another particularly upset me. I cried behind my sunglasses and hid my panic attack from all of them until I got home" (Woman in her 30s).*

The respondents were asked what would encourage them to travel by bus more. The most popular answer was 'Better behaviour by other travellers', stated by about half of them. Nearly half said they would like 'Clearer information on board the bus about the route and the next stop' and 'Clearer bus timetables and maps'. The latter two factors are both associated with wayfinding which was a major cause of anxiety. 'Clearer websites' are another factor that would help. About one third wanted 'Better trained drivers'. Even though almost all drivers have been through driver training, but that does that does not necessarily, mean that they show empathy with people who get a bit confused.

### **Summing up.**

Buses play a vital role in society, providing a form of travel that is essential for some people and playing a part on most people's lives at some stage. Even the most determined car user may find that, in later life, they have to rely on the bus. Buses have improved over the years in terms of physical design, information provision and driver training. There is scope for further improvement, for example, in terms of information at bus stops. Not everyone carries a mobile phone, so if you can only find the time of the next bus by phoning up, they cannot do that. The Government seems to recognise the role that buses play, and is currently investing in buses, but who know what is going to happen there? Overall, the prospects for buses seem to be pretty good.

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