

# JONATHAN BRAY



## The future of streets - who are they for?

A new report from the Centre for London think tank offers fresh thinking on the future of roads and streets in London - and beyond

► Too many think tank reports tread familiar ground to chase headlines which the media is already warmed up to. So where's the fresh thinking? *Street Smarts: Report of the Commission on the Future of London's Roads and Streets* from the Centre for London is one such exception. Calm, thoughtful and lucid, it takes current thinking on the future of streets, weaves it together into a magisterial overview and then prods and tests how we could move faster into that future.

The report covers a lot of ground and is well worth a read in itself, so I won't attempt to summarise it all. However here are some key ideas that struck me when thinking about streets of the future - and by extension the future of the urban bus.

One of the interesting questions the report asks is who are streets for in the first place? It points out that although streets are often primarily viewed as ways of moving vehicles rapidly from A to B they also help shape the nature of the cities they pass through in ways that help determine and reinforce patterns of equality, deprivation and opportunity. Especially where traffic barrels through poorer inner city areas en route from suburb A to city centre B. With cities increasingly planning for good growth and healthier streets the implication is less traffic and more of a shift within that traffic towards the most space efficient and greener modes.

Civilising interaction on our roads is another theme the report homes in on. We've all seen

examples of why that's needed. Last week in Lambeth on a relatively quiet and straight stretch of main road with a dedicated cycle lane I saw a male cyclist cruise through a red light at speed almost ploughing into a small girl on a bike who planned to cross the cycle path - given she had a green light to do so. Her mother screamed at her to stop leaving the girl in tears, her mother nursing a grudge against cyclists and the bloke getting to work five seconds earlier. Way to go fella. The report calls for a London Movement Code with clear principles and rules for all street users to encourage greater civility, citing the Code de la Rue in Belgium as an example. It establishes a duty on stronger road users towards more vulnerable users.

Streets will also need to be prepared for transformative technological change. At present all the focus is on the vehicles but the roads they run on are just as important. With more electric and connected (maybe autonomous) vehicles there will be a need for more charging points and more pick up and drop off points/areas. Kerb space will become an even more scarce and contested commodity

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than it is now. The report calls for more authorities to follow Southwark's lead and to establish kerb space hierarchies and policies.

Parking will also need to be addressed. The report suggests that there should be more trials of smart and variable charging regimes for parking in order to achieve far higher levels of occupancy. For residential parking the report says it's time to move towards controlling numbers in order to keep parking to sustainable levels. Some of these measures could help cut congestion and free up road space for space efficient buses in cleverer and smarter ways than just the traditional fight over who gets to hold the brush in the pot of white paint when dividing up the road space between the modes.

Road space could also be freed up through more consolidation of freight deliveries. Here the report distinguishes between on and off-site consolidation. Off-site consolidation would mean deliveries to a city going to a number of consolidation points (mostly at the urban fringe) for onward delivery into the city itself by appropriate vehicles. On-site consolidation must be one of the easiest ways to reduce traffic there is. It doesn't involve a single transport planner or any transport investment. All it involves is large public and private sector concerns consolidating the way they order goods to minimise the number of deliveries. Don't allow people to order a pencil for next day delivery. Consolidate all the stationery orders into a single delivery. There's probably a spare pencil in the cupboard anyway!

One of the report's more challenging recommendations is to make the case for the public sector to play a more direct role in mobility services instead of leaving it to the market with all the uncertainty that creates in terms of modal shift, congestion and social inclusion. Instead, the report argues that Transport for London should take the lead building on what it already has in Oyster and control of the public transport network. The report argues that this would enable TfL to ensure MaaS (Mobility as a Service) could benefit low income shift workers, or NHS staff, through differential charging. It could also ensure a social perspective on how automation might unfold for the transport sector. Although the report is about London's streets it's more than relevant to any city that wants to think clearly and ambitiously about the future of its streets.

# “On the buses consumer rights, performance and safety stats are distinctly second class”



Red London buses and crowds of shoppers on Oxford Street

## Bus safety

At the last meeting of UTG’s bus strategy group meeting in London it was striking that the only body seriously looking at how to improve the safety of the bus is TfL. Although the Department for Transport, the Traffic Commissioners and DVSA are responsible at a national level, try finding anything on the internet that gives a clear picture of casualty and accident rates, key trends, and areas where further research or action is needed. You won’t find much. Compare and contrast with the rail sector where all of this is readily available for an industry which also carries out thorough published reports into significant accidents.

Bus casualties in London became a more high profile issue recently and TfL is filling the vacuum of national policy with a ‘vision zero’ objective of nobody killed on, or by, a bus by 2030 and ahead of this target, reducing the number of people who are killed or seriously injured in, or by, London buses by 70% by 2022. The aim is to achieve this through structured

and systematic analysis of accident and collision data and reports to identify root causes - which is then fed through to all the key actors in the delivery of London’s bus services. There are also action plans to address key causes. This includes vehicle design and driver aids, performance management of contractors and better driver recruitment and training.

Whilst TfL ploughs this invaluable but lonely furrow there’s nothing remotely similar going on at the national level. It strikes me that the lax and Edwardian way in which bus safety is currently overseen at the national level is all part of the wider archaic way in which the bus industry is overseen. The contrast with rail is particularly stark. Stats on rail safety and performance are readily available and there is a statutory watchdog for passengers which handles complaints. On the buses consumer rights, performance and safety stats are distinctly second class. Too often performance information is buried deep despite real time information systems generating masses of it

- often at public expense. Even fares info can only legally be obtained when you physically get on the bus. And the Traffic Commissioners remain so obscure that most passengers don’t have a clue they exist.

The DfT has been slow to get moving on the open data aspects of the Bus Services Act. At least with the hard yards of the Bus Services Act in relation to the franchising and partnership powers now done there is the opportunity to place the open data provisions within a much wider ambition of reforming the overall consumer and safety framework for the bus industry. It shouldn’t be down to TfL to fill the safety gap - especially when it leaves bus passengers, bus drivers, pedestrians and other road users elsewhere vulnerable to the dangers that London is tackling.

## Working on the train

I wrote a lot of this column on a long journey back from a break in France in comfort in the very well designed standard class on a TGV from Marseille to Lille Europe tearing across France at close to 300kph. It wouldn’t have been so easy to write in standard class in many equivalent UK intercity trains with increasingly teeny tiny seatback tables and no elbow room, though I would have had longer to write it. And to be fair would probably have had Wi-Fi - which the TGV didn’t.

The bleak and uncomfortable new Eurostar trains with their rock hard seats and drug clinic lighting seem also to follow some bizarre unwritten rule that the newer the train the more plasticky and uncomfortable the interiors. At least on the final leg of my journey back to my home city of York I could rely on a decades old Grand Central HST for comfort. Let’s hope that if and when the HSTs are finally pensioned off a few quid is also lavished on the seats of the new HS2 trains - alongside the billions on the infrastructure. As my TGV journey underlined - it’s not just speed that makes for a good rail journey. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

▶ Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.