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Buses - it isn't all about congestion

Bus operators claim that their services can't prosper unless traffic congestion is tackled, but the evidence suggests otherwise

► I agree with Brian Souter. When he said at last year's Scottish CPT event that the bus industry relied too much on gut instinct and not enough on research. The Stagecoach chairman went on: "How much have we put into research and development in the last five years? We're getting worse, not better..."

Indeed nothing better exemplifies this state of play than incumbent monopoly bus operators' favourite 'fact' of all time. That buses can't prosper unless traffic congestion is tackled. However, I'm going to suggest something shocking in a sector which holds this truth to be self evident. Which is that the evidence base does not support this assertion. The evidence base is telling a different story - which is that there are many other factors at play in determining whether bus use rises or falls in a particular area and some of these may carry greater weight than traffic congestion depending on the local circumstances.

If it were always true that bus use is intrinsically linked to journey speeds, and that this is the only thing that matters, then why is bus use falling in the only major city region where traffic speeds are rising (South Yorkshire)? And when one looks at the top 10 places where bus use is high or growing, why are there so many places which are not the first locales you would think of in connection with the phrase 'free flowing traffic'?

So in the top 10 for growth in bus use, or highest bus use per head (or both) are Bournemouth, Bristol and Reading which

were respectively 8th, 10th and 12th in a survey of the most congested places in Britain in a Go Compare survey last year. It's even possible that in certain contexts congested conditions could give the bus a competitive advantage over the car: as in you have to sit in traffic anyway then you might as well get the bus (where you can also do things you can't do when driving - such as maintaining your smart device addiction). And that's even before we start talking about bus decline in places, and at times of day, when congestion is irrelevant (because there isn't any) such as many places in the evenings, in the off peak and in many rural areas all day every day.

In our recent report we sought to take a more objective, look at all the factors that are relevant when looking at what's driving bus patronage change. I won't go through them all here (and there are few surprises in the headings) but it's interesting how the same factors can have different effects depending on the local market.

The state of the UK economy is one factor in driving demand for travel, but the ramifications can play out differently in different areas. So

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a growing economy could lead to more car ownership and less bus use in places where car ownership is currently low and bus use is high. Meanwhile, in London, the rate of growth of the London economy (and inward migration) has slowed, whilst at the same time incomes have not kept pace with living costs. One of the impacts of all this has been less discretionary travel in London which in turn has hit bus use. Elsewhere, buoyant city centre and retail economies have been good for the bus in some of the more prosperous top 10 areas where the bus is performing well.

Young people are another fascinating and complicated factor. Young people are moving away from car ownership at pace - although not necessarily towards the bus. However, where the circumstances or the fares offer are right (or both) then this can be great news for the bus. So the youthful demographic of the West Midlands looks like it's a factor in recent better patronage news there. Bournemouth, being the second biggest centre outside London for English schools could well be giving a helping hand to bus use there. The location of new student living quarters in Bristol is a plus for the bus in the city. And then there's the simple young peoples' fares offer in Merseyside which has had such a transformational effect on ridership. Who would have guessed it? Simpler and cheaper fares can bring back passengers to the bus. More passengers in the National Express low fare zones in the West Midlands is a further example of this.

Whilst I've knocked the idea that congestion is the only thing that matters, my argument isn't so simplistic to suggest that it is irrelevant - far from it. Making bus journey times faster, more consistent and more competitive with alternative modes should (all other things being equal) make bus services more attractive and should help drive patronage upwards. This is why back in 2014 we were the ones that initiated the joint work with CBT, CPT and Greener Journeys on making the case for bus priority schemes and setting up the bus priority works website. It was also instructive that, despite the rhetoric about the importance of bus priority at that time the industry was unable to furnish us with any evidence about the benefits of any schemes to them that we could highlight in the materials and on the website. Since then the evidence base is now in

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Bournemouth is the UK's eighth most congested area according to a recent survey - but it hasn't stopped bus use from growing

much better shape and as UTG we continue to support bus priority schemes.

However, supporting individual well thought through bus priority schemes (which often combine with wider street works to benefit local residents and retail as well as cyclists and pedestrians) is very different from the rhetorical open ended demands that urban congestion be eliminated for the bus - otherwise the bus has no future. This just isn't going to happen because busy cities will continue to have busy streets. Streets which will also have less space for vehicles of any sort as more space is given over to space for people. Urban cycling is also going to grow, and better provision is going to be made for it. More people walking and cycling is a good thing overall. People are going to want to use taxis, and shops need deliveries.

Having said that the bus can and should get a better deal on the streets - but it isn't suddenly going to get its own way everywhere, every day. And proponents of the absolutist arguments on congestion know all this anyway (hence the lack of detailed proposals). So the danger is that it becomes nothing more

than an all purpose excuse and a cop out. Like the Rev. Awdry story about Henry the Green Engine refusing to come out of the tunnel because it was raining, some in the bus sector are refusing to come out of their tunnel because of all the horrid cars.

When there is so much in a deregulated, and mostly uncontested industry, which is entirely under your control (and which has worked elsewhere) it seems rather convenient that the one thing holding you back is out of your control. Plus if they really meant it about congestion then it would be nice if there was more industry support for poor old local government over taking on the powers to enforce yellow boxes and other moving traffic offences. This would be instantly good for bus reliability without the need for any time consuming new infrastructure.

In avoiding simplistic solutions our report put forward three factors which seem to be present (singly or in multiple) where bus use is high or growing. Firstly, where car use is expensive or difficult. Secondly, where car ownership is low and there is a strong culture of bus use. Thirdly, where significant and

continuous research and development has been put into ensuring the nature of the service matches the needs of the local market. Hence growth has happened in some surprising places (including Jersey and the famous 36 on the Harrogate to Leeds corridor) as well as in some of the places on the top 10 buses list.

We intend to do more research to test these ideas further. Factors one and two are not always easy to replicate but factor three (the research and development) is applicable everywhere. We need more priority for buses on our roads. But this is an industry that also needs to give more priority to research and development and on getting under the skin (rather than concentrating on the spin) about what's really driving patronage trends. ■

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.