

## THE BARNET SOCIETY

### **REPORT TO THE TRANSPORT COMMITTEE OF THE LONDON ASSEMBLY INVESTIGATION INTO BUS SERVICES IN LONDON**

24 August 2013

#### 1 PREFACE

1.1 The Barnet Society is grateful to the Transport Committee of the London Assembly for the opportunity to comment on its investigation into bus services in London.

1.2 This report presents an Outer London view, but in doing so has to refer to London-wide and Central London problems and solutions. It is hoped that it will inform the Committee and help its consideration of this complex and many-faceted business.

#### 2 SUMMARY

2.1 The main points the Society makes are:

- a) The ability of the Mayor and TfL to cater for increased demand without increasing bus kilometres overall, or rather the net deficit, rests largely with making savings in services in Central London, where running times are desperately slow and loadings can be poor at certain times of day.
- b) The Mayor/TfL should recognise that tube and walk alternatives are more realistic for local trips in Central London than they are in Outer London.
- c) Increases in demand in Outer London should continue to be met in line with the economies of bus operation on roads which are less congested, and minor increases in headways on low frequency services should not be promoted.
- d) The Mayor/TfL should consider more orbital links in Barnet borough to meet increased demand, possibly aping some school bus services, and using 'fast' roads across the Green Belt to link new destinations on either side of the borough.
- e) The rise in local population and redevelopment proposals calls for more flexible bus services, particularly in and around The Spires shopping precinct, Barnet Market, Barnet Hospital and High Barnet tube.
- f) The unique combination of difficulties involved with catching a bus from High Barnet tube station to the local town centre and Barnet Hospital deserves investigation of the provision of a procured small minibus service using the station yard.
- g) Oyster cards should be valid for trips made wholly within and in the vicinity of Greater London, where these facilities have been withdrawn against the interests of local communities.

#### 3 INTRODUCTION

3.1 The Barnet Society's catchment is centred on Chipping Barnet, Arkley and Hadley, but its interest in planning strategy is wider and is essentially an Outer London one. It is adjacent to large stretches of Green Belt within the boroughs of Barnet and Enfield,

and in South Hertfordshire. These Green Belt areas are rigorously defended by the Society. Their existence has restricted the expansion of the road network connecting the town centres at the edges of the Green Belt. This does impose limitations on what variations can be achieved with the bus network, but it also offers opportunities. These are explored later.

- 3.2 In common with other Outer London suburbs, car ownership and use in Barnet is high, and is so recognised and accepted by the Mayor. Nevertheless the population is ageing and increasing at the younger end of life. School/college students and young adults use buses on a regular basis, as do people of all ages without a car. The Society is appreciative of the increase in frequency, reliability and network density that has occurred in Barnet's bus services since 1991. Developments like low floor buses, wheelchair and buggy access, and iBus information, together with Oyster ticketing, have further improved the appeal of bus travel both London-wide and locally in the last 10 years. The hallmark of Outer London bus services in the 1970s were low frequencies, staff shortages, vehicle failures and inadequate ticketing which slowed running time on one person-operated buses. Never again is the message from this Society.

#### 4 HOW CAN DEMAND BE MET WITHIN CURRENT SUBSIDY LEVELS?

- 4.1 The key question to address is how the Mayor and TfL can meet the growth in demand for bus travel in the next few years without increasing scheduled bus kilometres and thus net subsidy on the 'London Bus Network' (LBN) as a whole.
- 4.2 The increase in demand for bus services is likely to arise in a number of ways. There is an increase in population in London and this includes Outer London. Then there is an increase in the distance people have to travel, particularly in the outer suburbs, to get to and from schools, colleges and hospitals as they rationalise and specialise their service provision. Buses play an increased role in carrying people at different times of day for work and entertainment, as the phenomenal rise in night bus services in the last 20 years demonstrates. Last, there appears to be a rise in the number of adults using buses to get to work, possibly because of economic circumstances and perhaps because the cost and availability of parking is a factor.
- 4.3 The fact that people have the confidence to travel by bus in London reflects the improvements that have been made, and this contrasts dramatically with the situation in the Home Counties. It is critical that confidence in the network is not jeopardised by regular overcrowding.
- 4.4 A potential answer is to try to divert some existing demand to tube/rail services where capacity increases have been introduced, so allowing competing bus services to be reduced at the margin, with saved kilometres being able to be used elsewhere on the bus network. However only the Northern Line signalling will be completed before 2018/19, when Thameslink and Crossrail 1 will be operational. What relief to bus services has been achieved with the expansion of the London Overground and the Jubilee Line resignalling? This is not a magic solution!
- 4.5 Likewise there appears little scope for conversion of single deck bus routes to double deck operation (this carries extra cost) or increasing the number of routes which use the 10.6m long double-deckers which add 8 seats to the 10.2m model. The New Bus for London (NBfL) will add capacity with 600 vehicles being operational by 2016, but will this reduce the peak vehicle requirement (PVR) on the routes selected? It would be interesting to know the extra vehicle kilometres that had to be scheduled with normal sized double-deckers replacing the bendy buses!

- 4.6 The Society urges TfL (London Buses) to consider the performance of buses that serve Central London more critically. Traffic congestion aggravated by unplanned disruptions to traffic flow caused by burst water mains, demonstrations, celebrations and the like can cause havoc to bus schedules. Radio traffic reports often cite delays to buses of an hour or more, and these result in service irregularity and desperately slow running times. The bus operators have an impossible task at such times, and it is suspected London Buses have to allocate more resources to try to maintain 'adequate' services at least in the inner suburbs, away from the source of the delays. Buses 'trapped' in the central area may be on routes nominally scheduled at 10 buses per hour (bph) but actually only able to provide 6 bph, and that not evenly. Within Central London there is usually a tube or walk alternative, or even cycle hire, and this may be a reason why buses can be nearly empty at certain times of the day.
- 4.7 The relevance to us in Outer London is this. We don't want the difficulties of slow running/lost kilometres in Central London to be 'resolved' by making cuts in scheduled frequencies in Outer London, where generally running times are much better and rail/walk alternatives for local trips are not convenient.
- 4.8 More Outer London routes are low clockface frequency services, and reductions in schedules would be that much more dramatic. The use of non-clockface frequencies for extended periods on low frequency routes is not acceptable.
- 4.9 Would the dramatic increase in cycle use for Central London commuting along the major radial approaches and within the Central area give scope for reducing the number of peak-only buses required, as Sir Peter Hendy is anxious to identify?
- 4.10 It would be interesting to know whether dead kilometrage adds to the total amount of bus kilometrage within the Mayor's restrictions on net subsidy. A classic example is the 82 route, which runs empty between Finchley and Potters Bar garage.
- 4.11 The Barnet Society would object strongly to any policy to increase fares more than inflation deliberately to reduce demand on buses, or play around with elderly person travel concessions or their hours of validity, to achieve the same purpose.

## 5 IMPLICATIONS FOR BARNET

- 5.1 Bus routes in the High Barnet area are rarely overcrowded for extended periods of time. Some are well loaded at particular times, mainly when this coincides with school/college start and finish times. Others get well loaded elsewhere en route, notably the 263 between Whetstone and East Finchley for much of the working/shopping day. Most routes terminate locally, so they are more likely to offer spare capacity at High Barnet itself.
- 5.2 Residential development in the borough is to be centred on West Hendon, Grahame Park, Stonegrove, Mill Hill East and Dollis Valley sites. Major reorganisation is under way at local hospitals at Barnet, Edgware, Chase Farm, Finchley Memorial and the Royal Free, but the details are not finalised. There will be implications for bus services between catchment areas and the hospitals, and users most affected will be staff and outpatients. There is generous provision of schools and colleges in the borough, both public and private, faith and multi-faith, catering for students of different abilities and resident within and outside the borough. On average, pupils will need to travel further than traditionally, which puts a further onus on convenient and adequate bus service provision.

- 5.3 These factors will add demand to those expected generally in the borough. The Society believes that buses will need to cater for more orbital or dog leg journeys which may not be possible on the present network without interchange, which itself may not be convenient. This belief is guided by the number of school bus orbital connections (e.g. 606, 628/688, 653, 683, 605, day routes 251, 221 and Uno commercial route 614). It suggests that there may be merit in using the relatively fast running roads that cross the Green Belt as conduits for new bus services that link the east and west parts of the borough. While we acknowledge that express/limited-stop services may not be the complete answer in present circumstances, they may merit consideration for faster roads.
- 5.4 Chipping Barnet is a shopping centre badly in need of better shops and more shoppers. To foster this, our Town Team has succeeded, with the aid of Outer London Funding, in improving High Street shopfronts and enhancing St. John the Baptist's churchyard as a focus of community activity. Redevelopment of Barnet Market is beginning, and major upgrading of The Spires shopping centre is proposed. Barnet College, already drawing many students from outside Chipping Barnet, wishes to expand its offer. Along with satisfactory parking facilities, the Society believes the attraction of bus services is an important feature to promote. This involves attention to more convenient and adequate bus stops and stands.
- 5.5 Increasing footfall in the High Street area, new housing developments in and around the centre (with bigger proposals such as redevelopment of Barnet football ground on the horizon), the closure of Chase Farm Hospital's A&E department and the pressure on Barnet General car park would all benefit from more frequent and/or flexible bus services, for example hail-and-ride sections and a Hoppa circuit between High Barnet tube, The Spires and Barnet Hospital.
- 5.6 Bus interchange at High Barnet tube station is a long-standing complaint, caused by the steep walk up to the town centre and the positioning of the northbound bus stop relative to the station exit for connections to the town centre and the hospital, and the lack of a black cab service. Over the years this has meant the less athletic among us use alternative stations on occasions, such as New Barnet, Arnos Grove, Oakwood and even East Finchley, completing the journey to Chipping Barnet by bus. Hills encourage bus use, and Barnet Hill/High Street, Meadway and Manor Road are good local examples! There is not a lot that can be done without considerable investment, which no authority has been willing to justify. Nonetheless, reconsideration would be appreciated in the light of recent developments. High Barnet station is now disabled-friendly, and wheelchair users have access to all platforms (at great cost to TfL!); the lower entrance to the station is now manned in the evenings and weekends; and there is space at the car park entrance to change the configuration (as the car park is now pay and display). We believe this is the natural point for dropping off/picking up and bus transfer, particularly to/from a minibus with facilities for wheelchairs, running as a procured bus service on a fixed route from Mondays to Saturdays.
- 5.7 There is one other bus matter that concerns The Barnet Society which could adversely affect the future wellbeing of Chipping Barnet and local bus connections. This is the withdrawal of Oyster ticketing from the whole of two commercial cross-boundary routes, including the sections of route within Greater London (Metrolink route 84 and Uno bus 614). Although pensionable-age passengers can continue to enjoy free travel, the facility comes under the English National Concessionary Scheme, with validity hours that are different from the London Councils' scheme. The real losers are holders of Oyster Travelcards who depend on these routes for trips which are either not otherwise provided for, or to save bus-to-bus interchange and thus total journey time.

- 5.8 Among the implications locally, Barnet pensioners will not be able to use Freedom Passes on Uno 614 to attend early clinic appointments at Edgware Community Hospital. Barnet has long and valuable links with Potters Bar, and a healthy and convenient bus link benefits both towns. Rumour, and it is only rumour, has it that the 84 bus use by Potters Bar residents has decreased dramatically since the ticketing changes, as they have switched to bus 298 to Cockfosters and Southgate on which Oyster cards are valid. This could put the future of the south end of route 84 in jeopardy, as well as sever the longer distance historic connection between Barnet and St.Albans. We have no doubt that, were this to happen, TfL (London Buses) would fill the gap by extending a procured service from The Spires to Potters Bar, but despite the consequent restoration of Oyster facilities it could reduce and complicate the bus pick-up arrangements outside The Spires.
- 5.9 The reason for this ticketing change is given as passengers over-riding the ticket system boundary. We are sure the reason is rather more complex, given smartcard sophistication nowadays. We understand that the 'free fares' system within Heathrow works well on trips leaving the Airport. This demonstrates that ticketing boundaries are not insurmountable.
- 5.10 We seem in Barnet to be unlucky not to have 'procured' London bus routes to the north and on the 'within London' sections on these two routes. What it does emphasise is the need for TfL to consult in an understanding way with local resident groups whose local environments can be materially affected by what it intends to do.