



JONATHAN BRAY



Bus cuts close doors onto the world

As the funding cliff-edge approaches, we should consider the impact the bus service cuts have on those who depend on them

▶ *“It’s like a forgotten world. It makes you feel depressed... we’ve got bus passes - that’s brilliant - I feel like framing mine... But no bus services to use them on. We’re on an estate surrounded by main roads. The whole of life is out there but we can’t access it.”*

Covid may have changed the context for bus services but bus cuts still aren’t victimless or without consequences. It’s just that (as with past waves of bus cuts) those who are most affected by them don’t have much clout or visibility. They were marginalised already and bus cuts marginalise them even further.

A few years back we worked with the Campaign for Better Transport and the Ecorys consultancy to look at the affects on two sample places (the Burbank Estate in Hartlepool and Marchwood in Hampshire) of losing their bus services. Re-reading the reports now the overall sense you get is that bus cuts close down both specific opportunities and, more widely, wall people into living more lonely, restricted and stigmatised lives. There’s a dimming of the lights; a closing of doors onto the world. This all comes at the cost of poorer physical and mental health and of missed life chances.

“Needed the bus to travel into town and often caught connecting bus to daughters and vice versa so don’t see as much of each other now. Feel totally isolated - I have problems walking, get short of breath and use a stick.”

“I want to be independent and it’s not allowing me to be independent. If you put yourself in my shoes, I’m not able to drive and I have health reasons as well... it’s not a very nice situation to be in when you know

your children want to go and do something and you have to say ‘no I’m sorry I can’t get you there because there isn’t a bus service.’”

These are the voices that remind us that buses are a key public service relied upon by those with the least. They remind us that whilst buses should be in the aspirational business of getting modal shift from the car for ‘people like us’, they are also there so that millions of people on low incomes, who don’t have access to a car in the first place, can get out of the house. And without a new funding deal for bus there will be many more people whose lives will be narrowed by the loss of their bus service.

Our latest report on bus funding (produced for us by Steer, and using our Metropolitan Bus Model) found that the number of bus passengers in city regions outside London could be up to 30% lower than before the pandemic. A hit of “similar magnitude” to the direct impact which Covid itself has had on demand. The report also found that over a quarter of city region bus services could be lost.

The report concluded: “Around half of all bus users are dependent on bus for their travel. The young and the elderly have the highest propensity to use bus, as do people in the lowest income quintile. A reduced bus service means that some of these people will have no viable travel alternative. A smaller public transport network means that remaining bus users will have reduced access to jobs, education, health and leisure activities, which will have knock-on negative impacts to the economy. Higher fares



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will make them worse off financially at a time when people are also facing higher gas and electricity bills and food price inflation.”

The report was picked up in *The Times* - part of the wider and welcome traction that bus cuts now have in the national and mainstream media. A level of interest that is probably greater than buses have had for many years. However, there’s a danger that we are now getting locked into a narrative which is in effect about pushing back the point (measured in months) at which additional Covid funding will end and we get back to ‘normal’ on funding. The problem with that is we need to get real about the order of magnitude increase in subsidy that will be needed if Covid’s legacy isn’t going to be more than just a particularly savage episode of the normal pattern of bus network and patronage contraction. Because if we go back to the level of revenue support we had for bus pre-Covid then that pretty much guarantees more decline (given that’s what it bought us before).

To even return to pre-Covid levels of patronage will require a substantial uplift in pre-Covid levels of subsidy - and to get to *Bus Back Better* nirvana you are looking at a further





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substantial uplift. You want high quality bus services everywhere? Then take a look at the subsidy levels that those European countries that have them are providing. It's based on something entirely different to the low subsidy and high fare model we have in the UK.

You want to find the money to do this - then there are some magic money trees available. For example, the Department for Transport could ask National Highways to give back the one they gave them for the zombie national road programme. But a long term higher subsidy model for bus doesn't suit incumbent monopolies - as it would lead to more expectations of public influence. And it doesn't suit the Treasury - because they don't like revenue subsidies (especially much bigger ones). So instead, an emerging narrative is that if we are going to career over the end of the Covid funding cliff edge at some stage

anyway then we might as well be grown up about it, face up to reality (in a sorrowful but professional way) and get on with the cuts now.

For those who are squeamish about the thought of another round of bus network cuts, or uncomfortable with the dissonance with *Bus Back Better*, then don't worry. Once the ship has steadied after Covid buses will get a shot in the arm from spending that flows from Bus Service Improvement Plans and City Region Sustainable Transport Settlements which will drive up patronage. So look on the bright side - these cuts might only be temporary. But somehow I doubt it. After all it's much more difficult to build back services and patronage after they've been trashed than if they had been sheltered from the storm in the first place.

A more rational and credible approach would be to maintain networks for a longer period while the fall-out from Covid is on

travel patterns becomes clearer (at present we are still at the guessing rather than knowing stage). We also need to give time to move to a reformed and long term funding settlement for bus. This would also allow more time for the benefits of upcoming capital investment in bus to take effect.

But, whatever happens next, it should be based on a recognition that cuts have consequences for those with the least. That the people who use bus services matter.

“It does make you think that you are reliant [on buses] and you could get quite down about it... I feel frustrated and a bit sort of left out. People like me in my situation or the elderly...don't really matter... I know that one person doesn't matter to them but really that one person does matter, everyone matters.” ■

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.

