

# JONATHAN BRAY



## Bus safety shouldn't be an afterthought

England's National Bus Strategy dragged poor practice into the spotlight but left the bus safety regime to stagnate in the margins

► The National Bus Strategy for England has an opinion about everything; from bus shelters to bus numbers - it knows best. However, there's one topic where it is curiously quiet. And that's bus safety. Or perhaps I should say dangerously quiet, given the yawning gulf that now exists between the approach taken in London and Northern Ireland on bus safety and the approach taken elsewhere in the UK. Or indeed, more widely, the approach taken to rail, maritime and aviation safety in the UK compared with bus in Great Britain outside London. In these places, and for these modes, there is a clear across the board structure for safety leadership and a transparent data driven approach to analysis, action and targets for reducing risk and accidents.

For some time we've made the case to the Department for Transport for reform to bring the safety regime for buses up to scratch - and that the starting point should be a review of current arrangements to benchmark them against best practice. We got nowhere on this so we've sought to fill a gap (that it shouldn't be up to us to fill) by commissioning such a review ourselves - from Loughborough University's Transport Safety Research Centre ([bit.ly/3qnlSsk](http://bit.ly/3qnlSsk)).

The report makes for concerning reading but it boils down to the fact at a national level, we don't have the data and analysis to drive safety policy on bus, and even if we did there's no single body to act on the analysis in a coherent and proactive way at the national

level. As one of those interviewed for the report said: "It just doesn't feel joined up." All of this adds up to a safety regime which is fragmented and reactive rather than coherent and proactive. That's not to say there isn't good practice and sharing on bus safety in England, but the under-resourced sum is less than the parts. In my professional lifetime the DfT has done not much more than tinker with the bus safety regime leaving it to do the best it can with minimal resources.

In effect Transport for London has been left to fill the vacuum on leadership and standard setting on bus safety with its Vision Zero target of no one to be killed or seriously injured on or by a London bus by 2030 and its comprehensive and transparent approach to analysis of risks followed up by programmes to tackle them, from its ground breaking bus vehicle safety standards to its data-led approach to reducing passenger injuries due to slips, trips and falls. And from advanced emergency braking to its in-depth work on the sounds that electric buses can make, it's TfL that has become both the defacto national research and development centre and leader

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on bus safety.

Meanwhile, it seems that if there is to be any significant change in the safety regime for buses in GB outside London then it will be a by-product of other forces at play. The government's enthusiasm for creating a framework by which autonomous vehicles can operate (alongside the stalling in road casualty reductions more widely) has led to a consultation on establishing a road collision accident investigation body to bring roads more into line with the body that exists for rail.

This is welcome. But for the investigation branch to work we also need something similar to the other safety bodies that rail has - so while the Rail Accident Investigation Branch investigates crashes, the Office of Rail and Road is the health and safety regulator and enforcement authority for the railway. Meanwhile the Rail Safety and Standards Board enables and informs safety leadership. Part of its job is to gather data to understand better how the industry is performing and enable it to identify emerging issues as early as possible, so action can be taken. The work of the RSSB allows the rail industry to work together as a single system to reduce risk as much as possible, and enables better safety decisions to be made, and means that safety investment can be targeted to where it is needed most. It's the proactive, looking ahead function that RSSB provides for the rail industry that is missing for bus in particular.

If there were to be an overarching safety body covering bus then there are pros and cons around whether this could be wrapped up within a national transport safety body, or whether there could be a roads or bus specific body. But the Loughborough report found support for such a body in principle. If such a body had the capacity to receive a much wider range of accident, risk and incident data than the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency currently does - and was able to analyse it and act on it - the safety regime for bus would start to look more like good practice.

The National Bus Strategy has dragged many elements of poor practice, and areas of bus provision which need to improve, into the spotlight but left the bus safety regime to stagnate in the margins. But shouldn't any responsible strategy for any industry have improving safety as a core objective rather than barely an afterthought?

# “Get the basics right and you have a urban bus network that people will respond to”

## Buses are coming home

Wales (population 3.2 million) wants all its buses franchised. Greater Manchester (2.8 million) and Liverpool City Region (1.5 million) are well down the road. West Yorkshire (2.3 million) and South Yorkshire (1.4 million) have triggered the process. London (8.9 million) and Northern Ireland's (1.9 million) buses are already under public control. That's nearly 22 million people in areas of the UK where bus services are under public control or somewhere on the road to it. Meanwhile, Stagecoach has thrown in the towel on trying to block bus franchising in Greater Manchester and the secretary of state for transport, Grant Shapps, has said how delighted he is that franchising in Greater Manchester is going ahead and that it's the way forward.

After facing years of disdain for vigorously making the case that this key public service should be run in the public interest I look forward to the next stage with everyone saying they were never really against it in the first place. Though reading the Stagecoach (of 'we would rather drink poison' fame) press release on their failed legal challenge it looks like this phase has started already. As they say - everything comes to he who waits.

## I'm an Edinburgh man myself

Having spent a few days in Edinburgh I'm an even bigger fan of Lothian buses than I was before. Every single bus feels like it's brand new. I've never ever been on a grubby one. I love the municipal dignity of the fleet - both the interiors and the exteriors. Maroon for urban, green for rural. And now you can tap and go that's the last remaining layer of hassle removed. It's the only city I can think of, other than London, where the bus feels like a mass transit system (especially with those tri-axle double decker giants) used by all sections of society. Get the basics consistently right and you have an urban bus network that people will respond to. ■

### 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.



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