

Bus travel

I have received answers to my questions on bus services. They reveal that only 2% of the bus fleet is electric on the latest government figures, despite all the active public sector talk of the electric revolution. They also reveal that bus usage remains low, even before the pandemic struck. The latest figures the government has supplied do not chart the fall in use that must have occurred over lockdown.

The fact that overall bus usage outside London was under 11 people per bus prior to covid tells us that bus services have to be heavily subsidised. London is stated to be under 19 people per bus. The figures presented divide passenger miles by bus miles. Buses can carry between 50 and over a hundred passengers depending on whether it is a single or double decker, and what the rules are on standing. The system entails subsidising the least popular services the most, as clearly the more passengers per bus the more fare revenue and the less need for subsidy. Bus companies are reluctant to cut out little used services, as of course they can argue that they need to offer a relatively frequent timetable to persuade people to use a bus. An outbound traveller who needs to get a return bus may wish to return at unpopular times of the day, so they need to run more near empty buses to keep or attract the overall custom.

Buses like trains have a relative advantage at busy times. They are best geared to providing commuter services into and out of job rich areas of towns and cities, and to offer shopping access at busy shopping times. They become very costly providing off peak services for people who may need to get to an evening event or to return at little used times of day or night. In London it should be easier to fill more of the seats on the buses given the density of people along key routes and the difficulty of taking private cars on cramped and inadequate roads.

What should the government and Councils think about how many bus services to subsidise? How should the industry go about constructing more popular timetables in a post pandemic age? It is a pity the government was not able to supply more up to date figures than the year to March 2020. I presume the pattern has changed a lot since then.