

TRANSPORT FOR LONDON

SURFACE TRANSPORT PANEL

SUBJECT: ORBITAL BUS SERVICES

DATE: 10 NOVEMBER 2009

1 PURPOSE AND DECISION REQUIRED

1.1 The Mayor gave a commitment to review the role of orbital bus services. This paper updates the Surface Transport Panel on the work carried out on the orbital bus route X26 and the proposed way forward on this matter.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Buses are the principal form of public transport for suburban travel in London. The current service provides an extensive network of orbital links, allowing people to travel to local town centres and beyond without changing bus. Longer distance journeys often require interchange between bus services, or between rail and bus. A trial, increasing the frequency of route X26, has been carried out to help in understanding the priorities for further development of orbital bus services.

2.2 Route X26 is an express service between Croydon and Heathrow, stopping only in the main centres, including Kingston and Sutton. Frequency was doubled to half-hourly on 22 November 2008. Affected boroughs, Assembly Members and others were consulted in the usual way prior to the change. Passenger surveys took place, before and after implementation, to understand what trips people are making, how often, for what purpose, and their views on the change.

2.3 The cost of operation increased by £1.2 million per year to a total of £2.4 million per year. Passenger usage has risen by approximately 80 per cent, or by 1,400 passengers per weekday, to a total of 3,200. Taking account of the extra fares income net of transfers from other services, the change has increased net operating cost by approximately £1 million per year. The benefits to passengers due to reduced waiting and travel time are estimated at approximately £0.9 million per year. Hence the change has a benefit to net cost ratio of 0.9 to 1. A ratio of 2.0 to 1 is normally required to justify ongoing subsidy.

2.4 Passenger surveys took place in October 2008, before the frequency increase, and again in February/March 2009. For comparative purposes, passengers using parallel all-stops services 213, 285 and 407 were also surveyed, on the same days.

2.5 The distributions of age, gender, working status and access to a car were very similar for X26 users to those for users of the parallel routes. One clear difference between X26 users and others was that they used the service less often, with some 40 per cent using the service less than once per month or for the first time.

- 2.6 The research overall shows that the change has been popular, as expected, and satisfaction has increased. It confirms that existing users, on balance, would support a further reduction in the number of stops. Stakeholders welcomed the improved frequency but also called for further enhancements to local services.

3 CONCLUSIONS

- 3.1 The change has been well received by users and stakeholders. However, net operating costs have risen by £1 million per year, with benefits to a relatively small number of passengers. The frequency has been retained as withdrawal will lead to significant adverse reaction from stakeholders.
- 3.2 Wider research for the developing transport strategy indicates that the dominant type of bus trip in the suburbs will remain relatively local, either as a stand-alone journey or as part of a longer journey involving interchange in a town centre to another bus or a train.
- 3.3 A number of stakeholders made suggestions for additional stops to be inserted on the route. However, existing passengers would welcome a reduction in stops. Generally, the provision is considered to broadly provide the right balance.
- 3.4 Findings from the research will feed into the ongoing development of the bus network, through detailed service planning and via engagement with boroughs on a sub-regional basis.
- 3.5 In the context of TfL's current Business Plan, the level of benefit delivered per pound of investment suggests that further investment in express orbital routes would not be a priority over other calls on funding. Investment in new services for growth areas such as Barking Riverside and maintenance of adequate services in and around town centres more generally, were examples of these other priority areas.
- 3.6 This leads to the conclusion that the benefit of current investment in orbital bus routes should be maximised by ensuring good awareness of the available network. Development of the information available, on all travel options, on the TfL website and through links to Local Authority sites is underway, with a pilot implemented with the London Borough of Richmond. If successful, this will be rolled out to other boroughs.

4 RECOMMENDATION

- 4.1 The Surface Transport Panel is asked to NOTE the report.

5 CONTACT

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