

1 Introduction

1. We began our inquiry into overcrowding on public transport as a way to concentrate minds upon the problem. We were convinced that overcrowding was an issue that simply was not taken seriously enough - the Department for Transport's targets recognised that overcrowding in London and the South East needed to be reduced, but were silent about potential problems elsewhere.

2. We recognise that a successful public transport system will be busy, and that overcrowding is not solely caused by a lack of physical infrastructure. It can be triggered by disruptions to otherwise adequate services, or even by passenger behaviour. When we began our inquiry we expected to find that overcrowding was an inevitable part of public transport, and the aim should be to manage it as an incidental to the core task of running services as efficiently as possible. In fact, the inquiry has convinced us that focussing on the traveller's experience is an effective way of identifying underlying problems and could itself increase efficiency. **Overcrowding on public transport is bad, and is likely to get worse. It must be taken far more seriously than at present. Managements which accept overcrowding as inevitable are not only short changing the travelling public; they are failing to run the system properly. Occasional crowding may be a sign of success; the current chronic overcrowding in all the major conurbations which gave evidence is unacceptable, and must be addressed.**

3. In the course of this inquiry, we received memoranda from members of the public, transport professionals and providers, local authorities, the SRA, the Department for Transport and others. We took oral evidence from Passenger Transport Executives, passenger representatives, train and bus operating companies, the Health and Safety Executive, Rolling Stock Operating Companies and the Chairman of the Strategic Rail Authority. We are very grateful to all those who helped us in this inquiry.

2 Why Overcrowding Matters

4. The Government wishes to encourage people to use public transport wherever it is appropriate.¹ The recent introduction of London's congestion charge only highlights this matter further. The system of paying to drive within the very centre of London has led to many more people leaving their cars behind them and opting for public transport. The initial reaction is that the system is a success, and many more areas of the country are thinking of adopting similar schemes in an attempt to decongest their busy city centres. However, this modal shift will only occur if public transport offers advantages over the car. These may not be comfort; if public transport is quicker, or solves car parking problems at the traveller's destination, or even is seen to be "greener", people will use it. As several respondents pointed

¹ Delivering Better Transport: Progress Report, DfT December 2002, p117

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Overcrowding on public transport is bad, and is likely to get worse. It must be taken far more seriously than at present. Managements which accept overcrowding as inevitable are not only short changing the travelling public; they are failing to run the system properly. Occasional crowding may be a sign of success; the current chronic overcrowding in all the major conurbations which gave evidence is unacceptable, and must be addressed. (Paragraph 2)

Why Overcrowding Matters: Impact on Business

2. Failure to provide an efficient public transport system means that employers are faced with staff who are tired, stressed and uncomfortable on arrival at the workplace. Lateness at work, loss of productivity, sickness absence, missed and rescheduled meetings and lost business due to public transport overcrowding and delays all impose real and significant costs. (Paragraph 7)

Why Overcrowding Matters: Impact on Tourism

3. Seasonal congestion matters. Local economies which depend on tourism will be severely damaged if visitors find the transport so bad that they are discouraged from returning, or from recommending a visit to others. Capacity must be provided to deal with seasonal peaks in demand as well as daily commuting patterns. (Paragraph 10)

Capacity

4. It is right to encourage more flexible work and travel patterns, but these will have only a marginal effect on journey patterns in the short to medium term. Public transport will only be attractive if it meets people's real needs. That means that there must be adequate capacity at peak periods. It is clear that there simply is not the capacity in the current system to cope with peak flows into most, if not all, major urban areas. (Paragraph 16)
5. It would be extremely easy to reverse the increases in public transport use in past years. Above all, the Department for Transport must ensure that the public transport system has the capacity it needs to handle the increases in passengers that its policies promote. (Paragraph 17)

Bus

6. Bus overcrowding could be much reduced by greater use and proper enforcement of bus priority measures. The bus fleet will be gradually replaced; operators should ensure that they introduce designs which are easy to board, and allow free movement around the bus. (Paragraph 23)