

Rethinking the future of the London transport market

Dan Lewis asks **What is the future of the London Transport Market?**

Unfortunately, the recent Mayor's Draft Transport Strategy for London seems to envision more of the same, largely involving an increasing role for its very own Transport for London. But this is mistaken.

Transport is entering a dynamic age and we must embrace it. It started with Uber but disruptive competitive entry in autonomous vehicles, pavement drones, ubiquitous bike share schemes and eventually air passenger vehicles are coming. Underpinning this by the mid-2020s will be huge volumes of data transmitted by fibre optic cable and 5G networks. And together they threaten to undermine TfL's self-regulated monopoly of services and transport assets.

It wasn't meant to be like this. The Mayor's Government has reasons for cheer. In 2018, London will become the first European Capital city to operate public transport without public subsidy. And no city has absorbed a growing population as well as London has from 2001 – 1.6m more which takes it to 8.7m in 2016. Without a growing population Crossrail, the Overground and all the tube upgrades would never have happened. Demographics creating pre-existing demand, not the Olympics of 2012, drove these investments.

Unfortunately, the powers that be do not seem to be adapting well to the new dawn of competitive - and particularly not public - transport. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the sorry case of Uber. TfL sets the prices for Black Cabs and the regulations under which they operate. Equally, Cabbies have to undergo an arduous few years

learning The Knowledge of London streets. These are all high barriers to entry, from a Byzantine age, keeping cab prices high and their numbers low.

Smartphones, satnavs and cheaper cars on demand from Uber changed all that. Uber lost its licence from TfL last September principally on safety grounds but the regulatory dispute could run for years in the courts. And no one expects that we can ever go back to only having Black Cabs again. When all's said and done, TfL's greatest error here was not to license additional competitors to Uber at the start. Uber now has an impossible to dislodge dominant market share with its ride-hailing app.

So what about bikes?

If as the Draft Strategy aspires, cycling is to play a growing role in Londoners' transport usage, then more space must be made for competing bike-share providers. While popular, Santander (or Boris) bikes do require a public subsidy of £10m each year and encroach on public road and pavement space as well as crowding out future competition. Unlocking hire bikes with Bluetooth-enabled phone apps, rather than docking them in valuable finite areas of public space, has to be a better way. And this is what is now offered by the likes of Ofo, Mobike, Urbo and oBike – who, unlike every other player in the London Transport Marketplace, don't even want a subsidy.

Another muted idea of the Draft Strategy was a possible delivery surcharge to reduce congestion. But so much more can be done to pioneer night-

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time deliveries and to encourage innovation in deliveries from things like delivery droids on pavements and flying drones. Finding more ways to enable the increased volume of goods transported rather than reduce it with taxation is a preferable way for a growing city competing on the world stage.

What holds us back is that underpinning the Draft Strategy and TfL in general, is always the belief in a modal shift to public transport from the car. Yet it is mistaken to always assume that such a move is in everyone's best interests, let alone that it's what people want. What about consumer choice?

And we detect a bias towards central over outer London in this approach, where the car remains the best and only method for any substantial trip for many suburban dwellers.

Car parking and pickup/drop-off spaces remain of pivotal importance to those Londoners who are not able at a physical level to easily shift between different forms of public transport. Keeping these spaces open for cars is actually critical for the coming self-driving vehicle revolution.

Now we really need to see a review of the roles and responsibilities of TfL. Ideally, we should aim for a facilitated environment for disruptive entry by transport competitors in the transport network of the future.

Increasing the market share of TfL should not be accepted as always the best way forward. The growth transport areas of the future – transport software apps and algorithms, self-driving connected vehicles, delivery drones in the air and pavement promise to transform and drive down the cost of living in London.

This is the time for the Mayor to step back and let the future transport market flourish. ■

