

Olympic Transport Challenge: London may not be able to withstand up to 3 million more transport users a day

Karen Anderton asks whether London transport will be able to cope with the massive influx of visitors for the Olympics. Whilst there are many things that have been done to handle the extra load, there are some things that just can't be foreseen and the public transport system is not impervious to external shocks.



This article is the second in a [series](#) being run jointly with [LSE Cities](#) on various public policy aspects of the London 2012 Olympics.

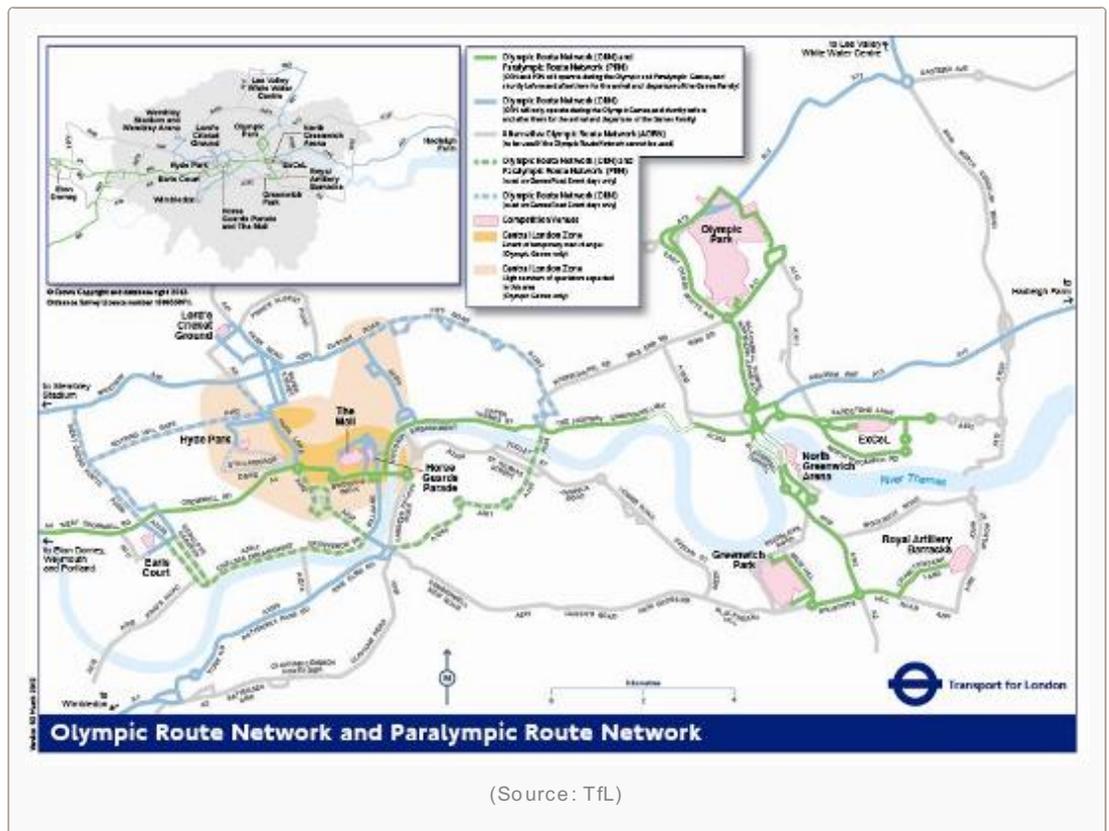
With only a couple of weeks to go before the Olympic action starts in London, it is an opportune time to reflect on the efforts made over the past few years to sure up the city. Can current residents and London's workforce, the thousands of spectators, and the wider Olympic and Paralympic family expected to attend the event get around efficiently and without delay?

According to the Olympic Delivery Plan in 2006, over £17 billion would be spent on improving London's transport ahead of the games *"to ensure reliable, safe and accessible transport for more than 55,000 Athletes, Officials, Media and other VIPs, 140,000 staff and volunteers, as well as around 500,000 spectators per day and all whilst minimising disruption to London's commuters and local communities"*. (Delivery Plan, 2006)

The first decisive measure was the plan to introduce an Olympic Route Network (ORN) of roads to transport the athletes and other 'Olympic Family' members safely, quickly and reliably between key locations. Criticism has been levelled at this measure, due to the additional impact the dedicated 'games lanes' will put on London's already incredibly busy roads. But 70 per cent of the Greater London area is expected to be unaffected by the ORN and in following suit from Sydney, Athens and Beijing respectively, getting athletes to venues in a timely manner has been identified as a priority for the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) and Transport for London (TfL) respectively.

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in terms of spectators however, London aspires to be the 'Public Transport Games'. No parking provision is being made around the Olympic site for spectators as it is the intention that all spectators will travel to venues by public transport, park and ride (over 12,000 park and ride spaces have been provided at locations around the M25 motorway) or by walking or cycling (Delivery Plan, 2006).



(Source: TfL)

Around 3.5 million trips are made daily on the Underground. It is expected that up to an additional 3 million trips will be made by spectators on the busiest days of the games. **Hotspots** are: the West End; Westminster; Bank; the South Bank from Waterloo to London Bridge; Canary Wharf; Stratford and Canning Town; Liverpool Street; King's Cross St. Pancras. There will be more buses, trains, tubes and taxis to serve the engorged population of London and services will have longer operating hours; running until 1:30am to help deal with demand at all hours and trains will run all night to coincide with the opening and closing of the games (LOCOG, London 2012 Transport Plan), so steps are being taken to try and account for such increased demand.

And whilst improvements and upgrades have been made across the network – including the DLR and East London Line upgrades – to safeguard against the extra load proving too much for London's transport system, the key concerns ahead of the game remain around capacity and reliability. And as was seen with the recent Jubilee celebrations – the messages not to drive into London (similar to those for the Olympics) were largely successful, but crowding and queueing was abundant across the tube network.

Some stations (i.e. London Bridge) used the event as a test for the Olympics – foresight and planning are clear – but the outcomes will probably be that at least parts of the network cannot withstand extra load. Similarly, recent events such as the Central line flood have demonstrated that, despite selected infrastructural improvements, it is a complex network and not immune to external shocks, even with precise planning in place.

Other infrastructural improvements include Stratford International station, which links the continent to the games via the Olympic Javelin service and also connects travellers from Central London to the Olympic Park in 10 minutes. Indeed, according to TfL, the Olympic Park will be directly served by 10 rail lines and three main stations. There will be a train arriving at one of the three Olympic Park stations every 15 seconds. The cable-car which opened late in June is another iconic and positive addition to the infrastructure which will undoubtedly help with capacity – but each of these improvements really support Olympic Park events only, with the other venues relying heavily on existing infrastructure to withstand extra load.

Several intercity services are already buckling under the pressure that commuters put on services – these are likely to fare badly during the games without extra capacity. It is likely that thousands of expected spectators will be coming from across the UK, and actually reaching London could be one of the major challenges. Moreover, access for less-abled travellers is still a major concern. Whilst the bus fleet has been equipped with low level flooring, there is still a large number of train and tube stations without wheelchair access for those with mobility needs, which restricts the freedom of all to attend the festival of sport.

As well as addressing infrastructure, a number of softer measures have been underway for some months to prepare Londoners for the influx of spectators from UK and abroad. These include walking maps given out at major train stations, visitor assistance at selected stations, advice (information through reports and training sessions) for businesses regarding how to prepare for games weeks in terms of staff and logistical concerns. And for spectators, tube maps have been updated on trains with venue information. The unpredictable weather of late may mean that the emphasis on walking and cycling to the games and around London is lost. Which could in turn add more pressure still to the network.

It is evident that TfL and LOCOG have thought long and hard about how to deliver a comprehensive transport strategy for the Olympics. Yet the fact remains that some of London's transport is at capacity the best of times and frequently subject to delay and congestion. In spite of aims to minimise disruption, London has a significant challenge on its hands to keep things moving from July 28th onwards and much attention will be placed on transport as an area on which to judge London's success or failure.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the author

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