

Key lessons from London's bus services

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curtailment — London's solution to delays which involves ending a service midway, letting commuters alight

and sending the bus to skirt the congested areas and serve those further down the route — are taken with nary a protest. These are seen as par for the course. Londoners simply get on with it and find other ways, like what one commuter told me.

Curtailment will be impossible here, until Singaporeans learn a more forgiving attitude and treat hiccups with more magnanimity.

The system, too, has to make it

much easier for commuters here. There are too few alternatives should commuters have to alight from their bus midway through.

Another issue Singapore faces is unprofitable routes. The authorities here are working around this problem under the new model by grouping routes and tendering them out in packages.

But this was never a problem in London, which tenders out routes in-

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dividually and has seven major operators. The question of non-profitable routes does not come into play, because there is no loss if you price the contract right, explained Mr John Trayner, managing director of Go-Ahead London, which has 6,000 drivers for its 2,200 bus fleet. Most operators can earn a profit just from the contract value, if they keep to their estimated costs, he added.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

The London system, of course, is not without flaws. Issues with drivers' welfare, the huge passenger load and vehicular traffic could introduce snags into the well-oiled system.

In a way, London is a victim of its own success. About 6.5 million passengers travel by bus a day and ridership has increased to a record 2.4 billion passenger boardings in the financial year of 2013, up 69 per cent from 1999. Huge passenger numbers have led to gripes about crowded buses, especially during peak hours.

Mr Trayner said everything from buses to depots are at full capacity and one glitch could lead to a gridlock in the system.

But passenger satisfaction remains high because of extensive bus priority lanes and strict timelines.

London bus fares are much higher than Singapore's too. At a flat fee of £1.45, those who are travelling shorter distances are disadvantaged. Bus fares have been increasing the past six years at rates higher than inflation.

Furthermore, with their Quality Incentive Contracts regime in place, which awards incentives or penalties based on the quality of service, drivers are on a tight schedule, plying routes like a race against time.

Mr Trayner told reporters that the bus operators maintain headway — or gaps between buses — almost like a religion.

The obsession with timings has implications. At an Aldwych bus station, where drivers can park their vehicles for a short break, drivers seem to have little time for themselves. They stay in their vehicles and within minutes they are off. When I approached one who came out for a smoke break, he tersely told me: “I have no time, I only have three minutes.”

A driver there works an average of 36 hours for a five-day week, but that could stretch to more than 40 hours with overtime.

Fatigue can be an issue for drivers put through such a relentless pace. Their welfare and the safety of passengers have to take priority over the pursuit of excellence.

Singapore has found it hard to recruit Singaporeans to be bus drivers. If the demands of the job go up, this task would become even harder.

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So it behooves us to be patient and to know that these things, ultimately, take time, even with the strongest Government commitment.

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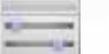
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