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Congestion in Oxford needs 'Plan B' warns bus company boss

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Congestion in Oxford is at "emergency levels" according to a bus company boss who is urging council leaders to come up with a "Plan B" solution.

Luke Marion, the managing director of Oxford Bus Company, said the county council, the highways authority, should not wait until the introduction of the [traffic](#) filters to tackle growing congestion. He is urging council leaders to act now as hold-ups around the city are delaying bus services and leading to a reduction in passenger numbers.

The council has spent £2.7m preparing to introduce six new traffic filters across Oxford but it has pledged not to introduce them while the Botley Road remains closed, due to a £161m Network Rail scheme to revamp Oxford rail station. The Botley Road closed at the rail bridge in April 2023, and rail minister Lord Hendy said in January Botley Road would not reopen until August 2026. Mr Marion urged the council to act now, instead of waiting until the new camera-enforced traffic filters - also known as bus gates - are introduced.

The managing director said: "The impact of the road closure has been devastating for many, and as a bus operator we've suffered too, through reductions in our patronage.

"Data proves congestion is now at emergency levels across Oxford and it is holding the city back, with hundreds of hours of productivity being lost every day to traffic jams.

"The Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) schemes in East Oxford have also slowed bus journey times, as they funnel a lot of traffic from side roads onto main arteries converging at The Plain roundabout, which does not have the capacity to deal with all the extra traffic – meaning the bus routes then clog up. We now have traffic jams during peak hours that previously did not exist."

Department for Transport figures show journey times have increased on roads including Iffley Road, Abingdon Road, Woodstock Road and Banbury Road.

Mr Marion added: "The county council's original plan was to introduce the LTNs in conjunction with six traffic filters in the city, to encourage people to change their behaviour and to walk, cycle and use buses more where they could. It was agreed to delay launching them until Botley Road reopened, which made sense on the original timelines for the rail works.

"But Oxford simply cannot cope with another year of worsening congestion – rather than continuing to wait for the traffic filters, we need a 'plan B' to address the congestion problem over the next 12 months, and we need it quickly.

"Journey times on Abingdon Road have increased by an average of 17% since the Botley Road was closed, and our services between Blackbird Leys and Oxford city centre have slowed down by 33% compared to 2013 levels."

Last year, Oxford Bus Company invested more than £30m to deliver a fleet of over 100 brand new electric vehicles, in partnership with [Oxfordshire County Council](#) and Stagecoach. Stagecoach has also made a similar substantial investment in its fleet.

Mr Marion said in order to maintain or improve services the company need to add more buses to the timetables, which was not commercially viable.

"The changes we recently made to increase the frequency of our 3A service to Littlemore and Sandford cost two more buses to implement than we had planned when we first started planning the improvements," he added.

"Our service 15 from Wood Farm to the city has seen its journey time worsen by an average of 15% compared to 2019, and is now scheduled to take 46 minutes at peak time, compared to 24 minutes off peak. This means that services like this operate at a greatly reduced frequency, at exactly the time that most people want to travel."

Mr Marion urged the county council to bring forward plans to "re-shape the road network to help ease congestion" before the Botley Road reopens.

In January, the Government increased the bus fare cap for single fares from £2 to £3, and it will remain at £3 until the end of 2025.

The county council said it has regular meetings with the county's bus operators "to review bus operations and possible benefits and impacts from any highways matters".

A spokesman added: "The county council is currently looking at what may be possible to alleviate traffic congestion during this interim period as we wait for Network Rail to complete its works."

Andrew Gant, cabinet member for highways management, said: "Our local bus services are a great option for travelling around the city and county easily.

"Traffic congestion is a problem on Oxford's narrow road network and the solution lies with providing realistic alternatives to the private car. We want to make public transport, walking, wheeling and cycling the natural first choice for short trips. This will help those that need to use cars do business in our city."

The county council said it would continue to liaise with bus operators, including discussing how to alleviate congestion as a result of the ongoing delays to reopening the Botley Road.

Graham Jones, of traders' group ROX (Backing Oxford Business), said the traffic filters scheme should be dropped.

He added: "There does need to be a serious re-think to tackle congestion but I don't think traffic filters will be the solution - it will just push traffic onto the ring road, and into streets where there are no filters."