

## Deputation to the Council for an Expanded 603 Bus Service

### Introduction

We are here on behalf of parents and the local communities of South Hampstead, Swiss Cottage, Belsize Park, Hampstead, Highgate, and Muswell Hill to advocate for an increase in the frequency of the 603 bus service. We have been supported in this campaign by local charity Green School Runs as well as local MPs, Councillors and Head Teachers. The route of the 603 bus provides a unique, safe and important transport link across these communities. However, it is currently failing to serve the needs of students, parents, and local residents simply through inadequate scheduling. We would like to ask the Council to work with TfL to improve the 603 service through the addition of smaller and more frequent 603 buses, particularly during school hours. This would significantly improve child safety on the school run and reduce car dependency, traffic congestion and pollution in line with both Camden Council, TfL, and government green initiatives.

### Current Issues

The 603 route, while initially established to meet the needs of students travelling between Muswell Hill, Highgate, and South Hampstead, has never adequately met its intended purpose. The early morning bus from Muswell Hill is not effective for the majority of children attending schools along the route, and the second bus runs infrequently, with only a handful of passengers, and does not serve ANY schools efficiently on its return route as it is misaligned with ALL school start times. By the time it reaches Swiss Cottage, it is essentially empty and serves no practical purpose. On its return journey back to Muswell Hill it is a hindrance to traffic, increases pollution and is nothing more than a wasted, empty resource – a *GhostBUS!*

We, and our predecessors, have been campaigning TfL to amend the timetable for almost two decades. Many parents desperately want to STOP driving to school in favour of using the 603 and ALL parents want a safer, convenient, single mode of transport for their children to commute. TfL consistently claims the service has been carefully timed to cater for the majority of passengers and that altering the service would inconvenience too many. We have proved repeatedly that this is not the case. Our campaign group, **603 Watch**, has canvassed local people about the failings of the route and our survey has gathered **562 requests for a change to the status quo** and this number grows daily. TfL claims that there is no business justification for adding more buses and that their current financial position prevents them from doing so. They fail to acknowledge that many of our survey respondents are actually fare-paying adults such as teachers, support staff, parents, domestic staff and even primary care workers at the Royal Free Hospital, particularly nurses.

### Importance of the 603 Route

The 603 route is uniquely positioned to meet the high demand for student transport within our communities. In Hampstead alone, there are 21 schools within a half-mile radius, and estimates suggest that around 15,000 students commute to Hampstead daily, with many driven by parents in private vehicles contributing significantly to high levels of congestion and pollution.

For students from Swiss Cottage, Belsize Park, and Hampstead travelling to Highgate schools, more than 300 students could benefit from timely access to the 603 route each day if buses arrived in Highgate **before 8:15 a.m. and departed after 4:15 p.m.** Those attending early morning and after school clubs have indicated that buses as early as 6:45am and as late as 6:15pm would also be well utilised. The revised timing would also benefit key workers at the Royal Free as well as customers and staff of the many businesses in Hampstead and Highgate.

No other bus service directly connects the communities located either side of Hampstead Heath. Alternative public transport options have significantly longer journey times and precarious transfers requiring children to cross multiple roads in heavy traffic (some, like Whitestone Pond, without pedestrian crossings or traffic lights) and necessitate long waits at isolated bus stops next to open woodland or on train station platforms in darkness and inclement weather for the majority of the year.

### **Growing Demand, Risks and Environmental Considerations**

Since the 603 route was established in 2004, demand has grown due to school expansions and an increase in before- and after-school activities, requiring students to travel at varying times. The risk of violence against young people travelling to school has also increased. With Mayor Sadiq Khan recently acknowledging that “the biggest age group that are victims of crime are young people... [and] the times of day where young people are victims... are either before or after school.” Furthermore, there has been an increase in car journeys nationwide, compounding local congestion and pollution.

The proposed expansion aligns with Camden Council’s and the Government’s goals for green and active travel solutions. A more frequent 603 service would reduce the reliance on cars for school drop-offs, alleviating traffic and minimising the environmental footprint in these densely populated areas and would importantly help our children get to school as directly, quickly and safely as possible.

### **Requested Changes**

We respectfully ask the Council to include the expansion of the 603 school bus in its Transport delivery strategy and to engage with TFL about that.

#### **1. Increase Morning and Afternoon Buses:**

- **Morning:** Provide regular buses from Muswell Hill and Swiss Cottage between 7:15 a.m. and 8:15 a.m. An even earlier start of 6:45 a.m. would accommodate early school clubs.
- **Afternoon:** Add buses running from Muswell Hill and Swiss Cottage between 3:15 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. Or until 6:15pm for after school club attendees.

#### **2. Single-Decker Bus Conversion:** Convert the service to single-decker buses, which are more suitable for navigating residential areas and have a lower environmental impact.

### **Conclusion**

Enhancing the 603 service would address the longstanding issue of inadequate and unsafe school transport and support the push for sustainable travel options. The addition of a single extra bus heading east scheduled appropriately in the mornings and one heading west in the afternoons would already make a huge difference. Expanding this service further would greatly benefit the communities along the route, including supporting essential workers. Our proposal would offer the local community a safe, reliable and environmentally friendly alternative to car travel, aligning with Camden Council’s commitment to reducing traffic and pollution. Thank you for considering this request for essential improvement of the 603 bus service.