

ENGLAND'S
ECONOMIC
HEARTLAND

Improving bus services in England's Economic Heartland

Where we are - and what could happen next



Welcome

Buses are the lifeblood of our communities. They provide access to employment, education, health services, leisure facilities and transport hubs for onward journeys. They are used by everyone from schoolchildren up to pensioners, they promote community cohesion and are often a lifeline to lower income families who may not have access to their own vehicles.

And yet, as Members of the EEH Strategic Transport Leadership Board have recognised, there is a feeling that bus services – particularly those outside of the metropolitan city areas in England – are on a perpetual decline, accelerated by the impact of COVID-19 and changing work patterns. With patronage across the region down by as much as 33% on 2019 levels*, many bus services have simply disappeared. While the Government’s National Bus Strategy for England, published in March 2021 was well received, the resultant bus service improvement funding left local authorities frustrated. Ambition was not met with investment, and the disparities in funding between neighbouring authorities risks creating unequal service offerings across the region and limit the ability for high quality intra regional journeys.

Board members have been clear: improving bus services must be a priority.

The EEH Bus Symposium 2023 will empower local decision makers with the information they require to plan a better future for buses. While most bus conferences tend to focus on the needs of large conurbations and densely populated cities, this event will reflect the reality in our region, its market towns and large rural areas alongside links to key urban areas.

The symposium will attempt to balance ambition with what is deliverable. That’s why the morning session will focus on what improvements can be achieved in the here and now, within the current financial and legislative framework. In the afternoon, the spotlight will turn to what changes – to both services and systems – would help realise an ambitious vision for bus travel in the region, one which increases patronage, lowers emissions and is fully integrated with other transport networks.

Delegates will hear from a range of senior-level speakers, including bus operators, government and local authority representatives and colleagues from across the country who have experienced local success in changing the fate of their bus services.

This brochure is intended to complement the symposium. It includes details on EEH’s work to date, highlights important data and trends, and includes summaries of other work and inquiries on the future of bus services and their recommendations. We hope it serves as a tool to aid discussions during the symposium, and a useful reference following it.

*DfT 2021/22 data.

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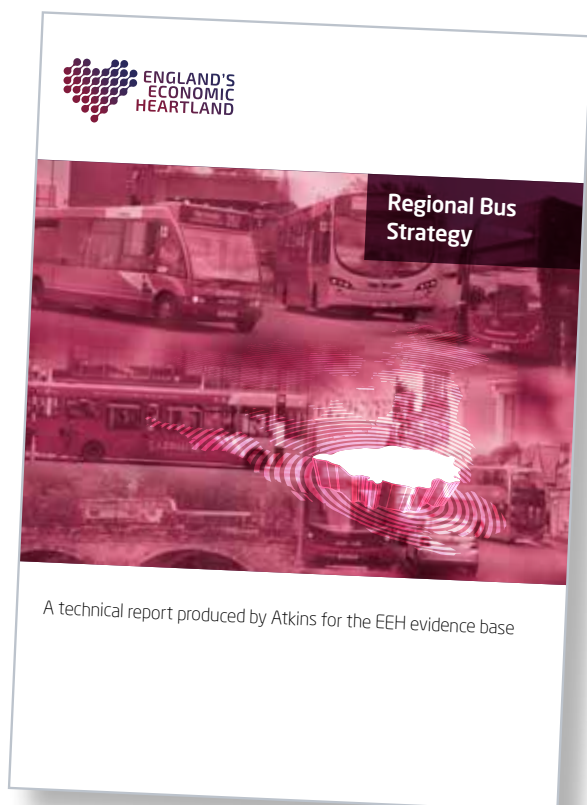
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Setting the regional ambition for bus

Regional Bus Strategy

EEH's Regional Bus Strategy, published in 2022, creates a vision for bus journeys in the Heartland. Given EEH's pan regional role, the study also sought to identify opportunities to improve cross-boundary bus corridors - using mobile phone data to track high volumes of movement along individual single corridors and comparing public transport journey times versus car.

It draws together the ambitions in our partners' bus service improvement plans to set a consistent regional vision and approach to bus travel. Indeed, the strategy identifies that over 250,000 trips are being made by all modes per day within the top 30 most popular cross boundary journeys in the EEH region. At present, most of these trips are being made by private car. There is clear opportunity for many of these trips to be carried out by bus, filling in gaps in rail provision at a fraction of the infrastructure cost (see map overleaf).



The Bus Strategy's ambitions

More frequent and reliable services

The delivery of more frequent and reliable services will improve intra-regional connectivity and encourage modal shift. Bus journey times which are more than double that of a car should be examined to determine where journey reliability and speeds can be improved.

Improvements to planning and integration with other modes

Improved ticketing, more regular services (removing long interchange waits) and a clear regional passenger charter (aligned to those of individual authorities) will help provide reassurance to passengers.

Improvements to fares and ticketing

Supporting the DfT's coordination of the national ticketing back-office will help to speed introduction of multi-operator and multi-modal ticketing products, capping fares and simplifying interchanges.

Higher specification buses

The improved presentation of buses and infrastructure gives reassurance of attention to delivery and hence pride in the bus network. Greater feelings of personal safety also encourage the use of public transport services at all times of the day.

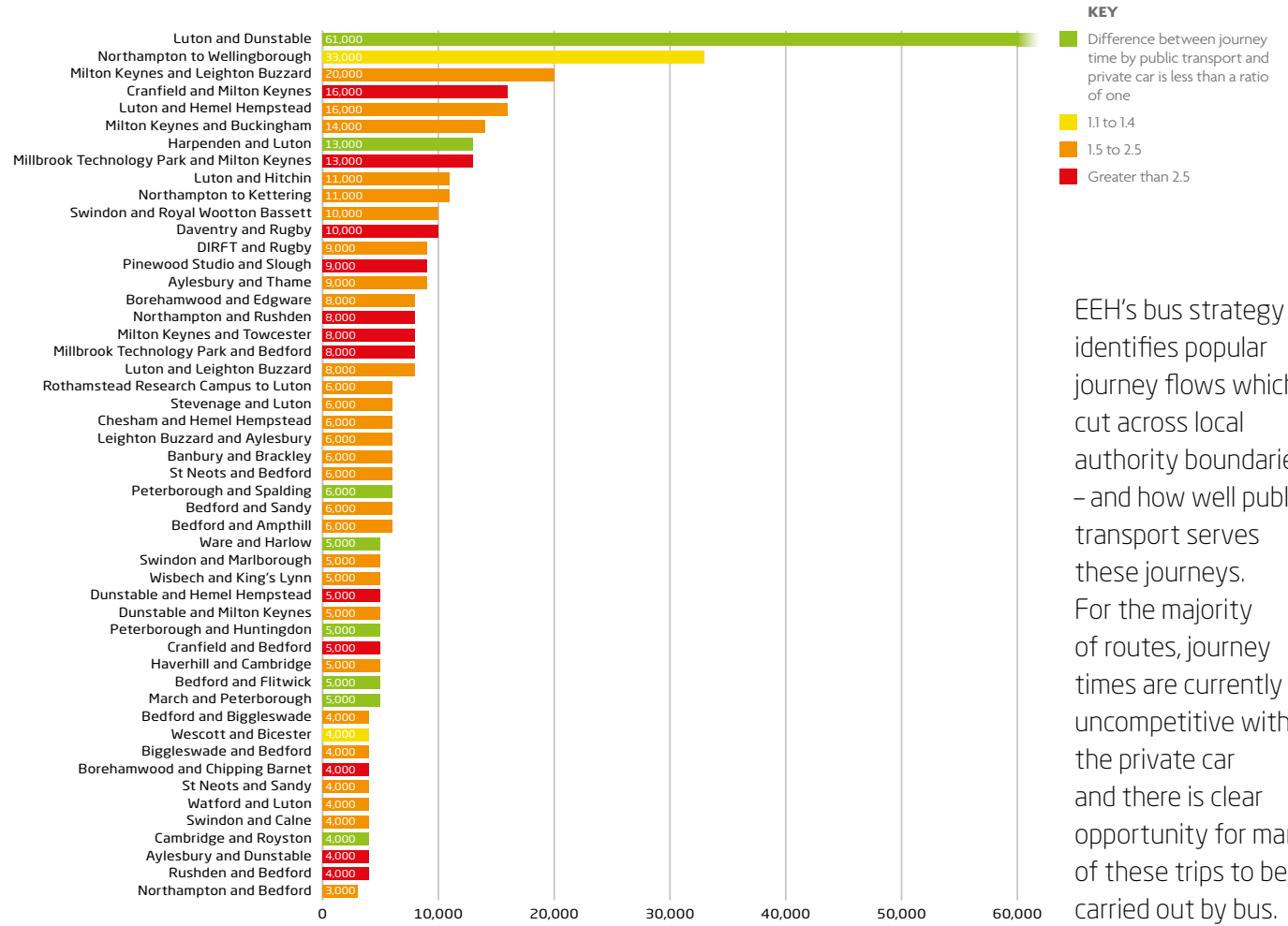
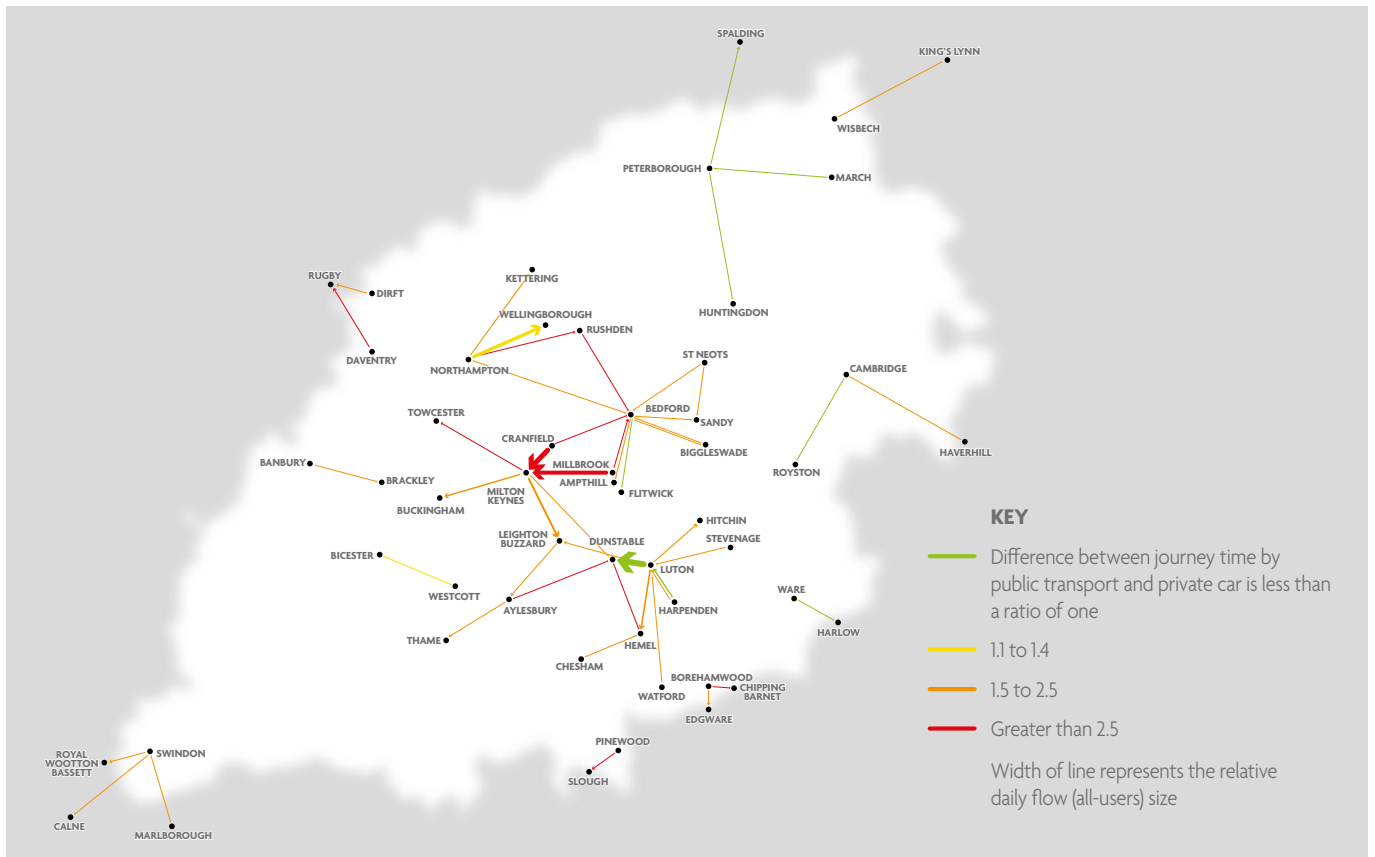
Improvements to passenger engagement

Coordinating a regional bus passenger charter, ensuring consistent standards and passenger safeguards across the region, will demonstrate strength in the bus and coach network.

Decarbonisation

Delivery of a zero-emission bus and coach fleet will support the regional decarbonisation objectives.

Top 50 cross-boundary daily flows and the level of public transport competitiveness in EEH region



EEH's bus strategy identifies popular journey flows which cut across local authority boundaries – and how well public transport serves these journeys. For the majority of routes, journey times are currently uncompetitive with the private car and there is clear opportunity for many of these trips to be carried out by bus.



EEH's further bus work

Understanding local attitudes to bus travel

In January 2023 EEH surveyed more than 7,000 people aged over 16 in the EEH region on their attitudes towards bus travel. More information on the survey is available in the data section.

Identifying inter-urban priorities

EEH's multimodal connectivity studies identify the measures and potential links to increase inter-urban bus connectivity along six broad corridors in the region. The evidence captured will be used to shape investment proposals going forward, through EEH or in support of individual local authorities' priorities.

Making mobility hubs a reality

EEH's business case guidance provides practical advice to local authorities on developing the strategic, economic, and financial cases for mobility hubs, particularly in rural areas. The next phase of work will identify potential locations at a strategic level for mobility hubs – visible, safe, and accessible spaces where public, shared, and active travel modes are available for use.

Practical support for our partners

Expert advice and guidance on how to improve bus services was made available to local transport authority officers in early 2023. This included, for example, practical information on data analysis, quick wins, funding mechanisms and presenting a strong case. A regional bus forum, sharing best practice, has also been established and is well-attended by officers.

Bus funding bid booster

This tool, currently in development, will calculate the economic value of bus journey time savings for the top 30 most popular cross boundary journeys in the region, based upon data used within EEH existing Regional Bus Strategy.

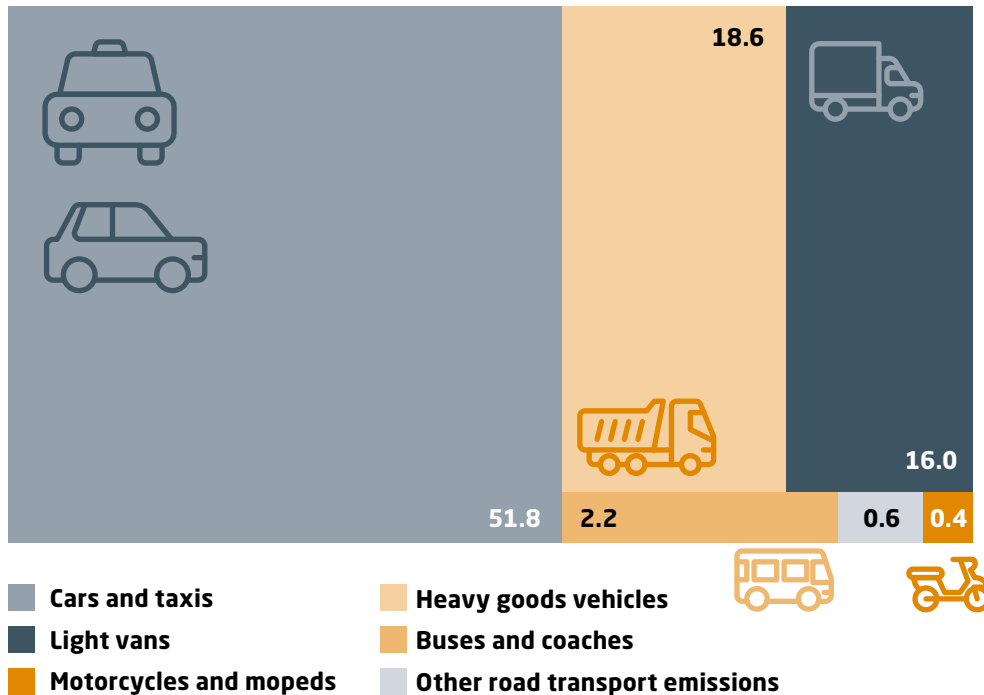
It can be utilised in the preparation of the business case development, including bids for funding.



What the data says...

Buses and carbon emissions

Cars and taxis accounted for over half of all emissions from road transport in the UK in 2020.



Since 2016 transport has been the UK's largest emitting sector for greenhouse gases. In 2020, road transport accounted for 91 per cent of domestic transport emissions.

The biggest contributor to surface transport emissions are cars and taxis: 52 per cent in 2020 and 61 per cent in 2019.

On average across English regions, one-third (33 per cent) of the emissions within the scope of local authorities were from transport.

Taken together, buses and coaches are the most efficient form of road passenger transport, as cars usually carry just one or two people at a time, a bus can carry 50 people or more. Which means that on average cars emit between 57 and 322 grams of CO₂ per passenger kilometre compared to buses at just 22-92.

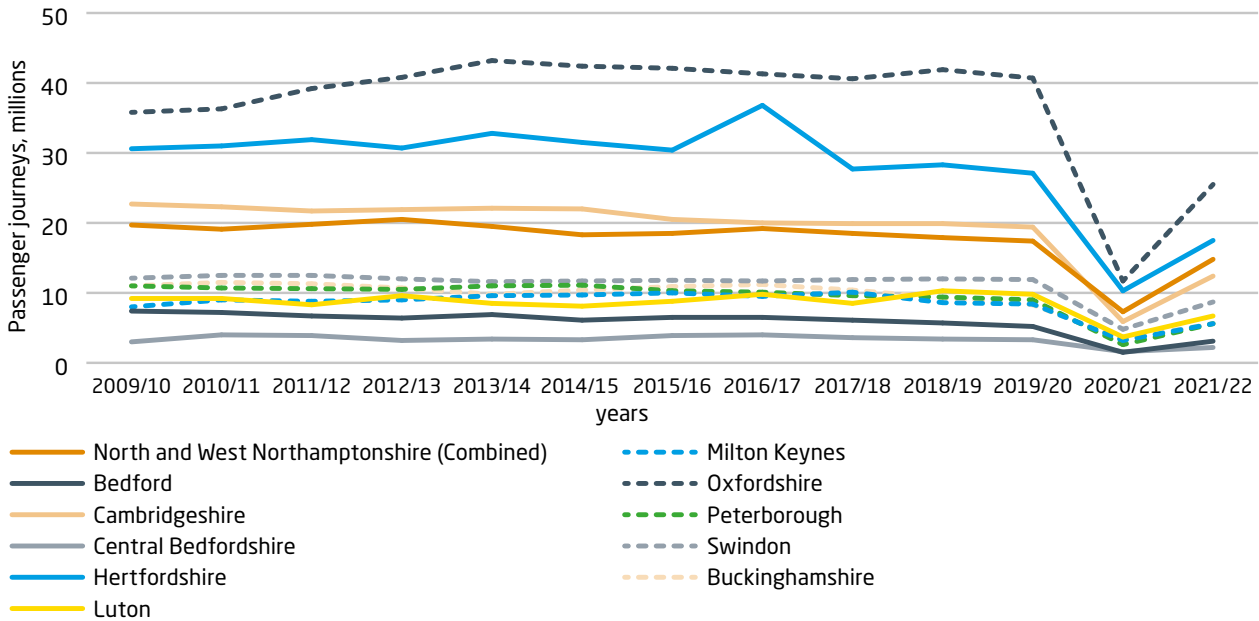
BSIP funding

Local transport authorities within the EEH Region	BSIP amount awarded (2022)	BSIP Plus amount awarded (2023)
Central Bedfordshire Council	£3,700,000	£350,457
Hertfordshire County Council	£29,700,000	£1,488,381
Luton Borough Council	£19,100,000	
Oxfordshire County Council	£12,700,000	£963,741
Bedford Borough Council		£546,757
Buckinghamshire Council		£1,310,333
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority		£2,314,172
Swindon Borough Council		£415,830
Milton Keynes City Council		£654,193
North Northamptonshire Council		£569,412
West Northamptonshire Council		£687,109
Total allocated	£65,200,000	£9,300,385

Only four EEH authorities received original BSIP funding in 2022. The remaining authorities were awarded BSIP Plus funding in spring 2023. The amounts awarded are in many cases significantly below what was requested by authorities to realise the ambitions of their bus service improvement plans.

Patronage

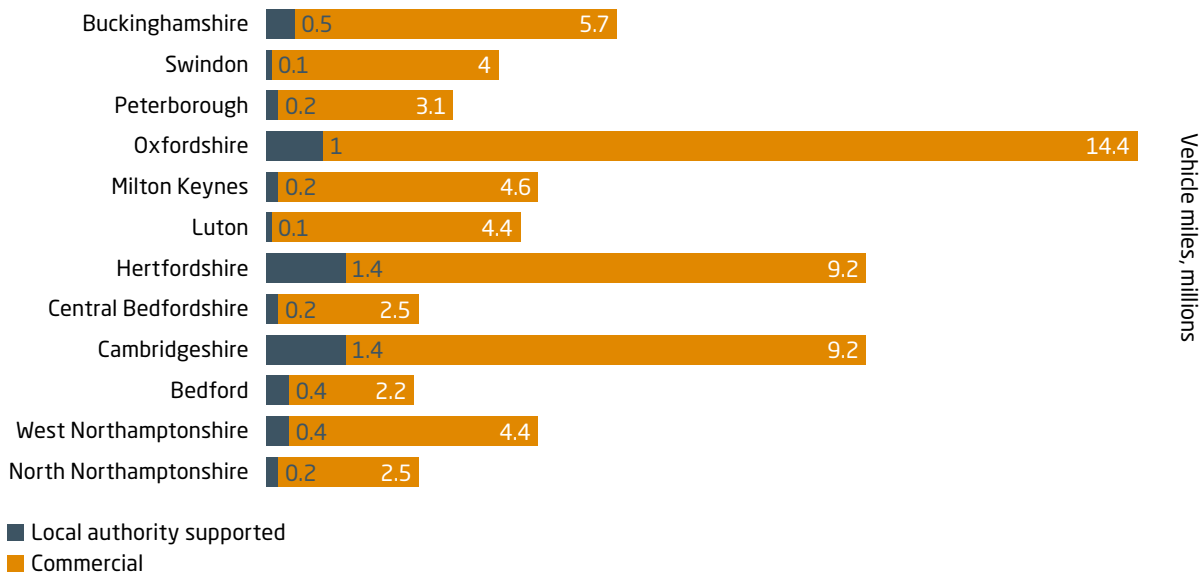
Passenger journeys (millions) by EEH local authority areas, since 2009/10



Patronage declined steeply during the pandemic – with some areas losing over 70 % of passengers journeys – and are still some way off returning to pre-pandemic levels. Rural routes were harder hit than urban routes. Analysis by the County Councils Network shows, while all areas of England witnessed reductions, rural areas saw the largest percentage reductions, with passenger journeys hit least on urban routes and in areas with regular services throughout the day providing for predominantly work and commuter-based need.

Funding

Vehicle miles on local bus services by local authority, and service type (millions) - 2021/22

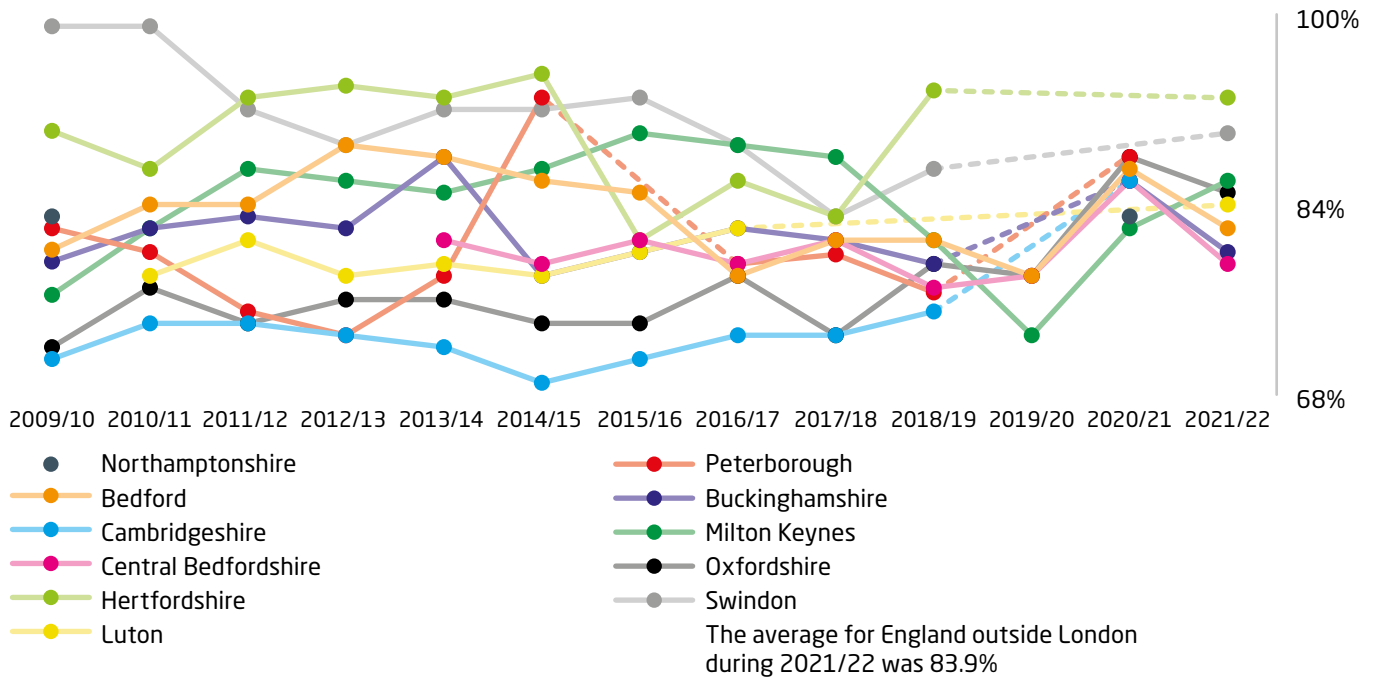


A breakdown of funding (local authority supported vs commercial) of local bus journeys by local authority areas for 2021/22.

There were 72.5 million miles of bus journeys in EEH during 2021/22. 91% were funded commercially and 9% supported by the local authority. In England as a whole (outside of London) 87 % of services are funded commercially and 13 % are local authority supported.

Reliability

Percentage of bus services running on time by EEH local authority, from 2009/10

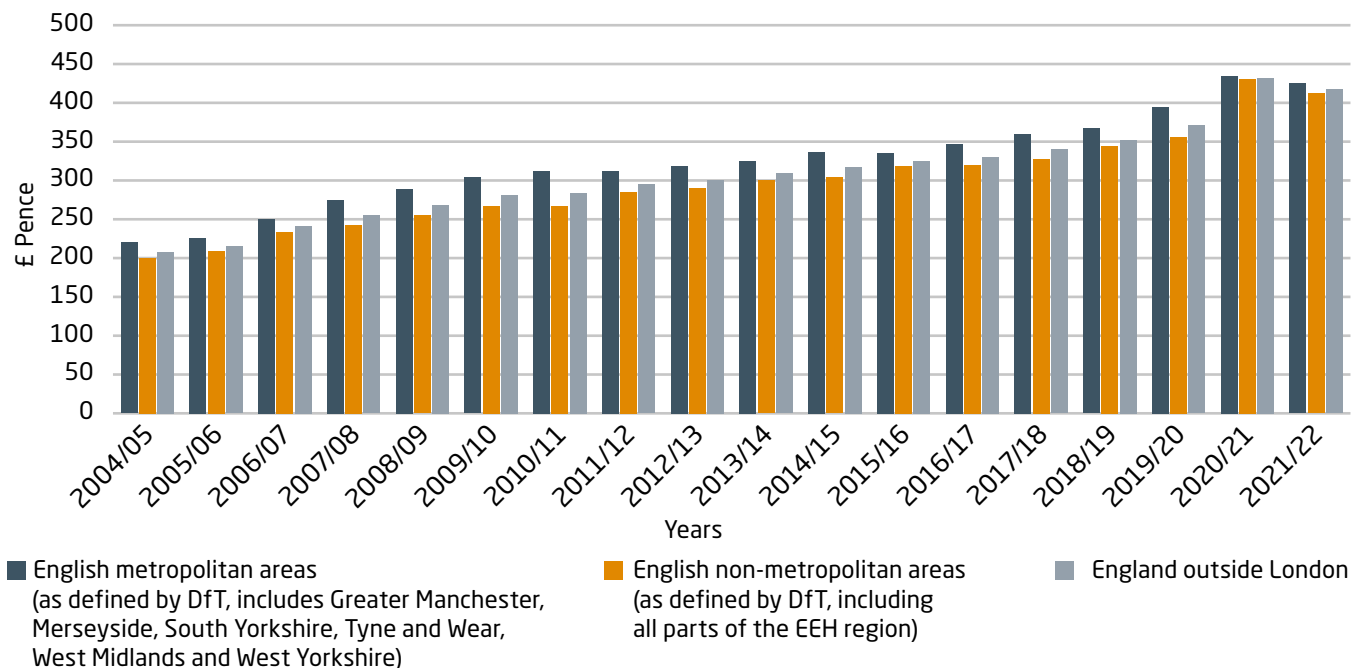


The percentage of 'non frequent' bus services running on time (as defined by DfT as no more than six minutes late, where services are less than six buses per hour) by local authority within the EEH region.

Please note: Data for North and West Northamptonshire is unavailable, and the only available data for Northamptonshire is for 2020/21 (83%). Data for other authorities may also be incomplete. Where data is missing for consecutive years, this is indicated by a dotted line.

Operating costs

Operating cost per vehicle mile on local bus services by non - metropolitan and metropolitan areas



Operating costs per vehicle mile on local bus services. Rising operating costs, including fuel prices and driver shortages, are placing significant pressures on bus operators.

Attitudes to bus travel

EEH's survey of more than 7,000 people aged over 16 highlighted that:



60% of people who had used a bus in the last **12 months** were positive about the quality of their local service.

75%

of respondents said they would support integrated ticketing. More than half said they planned to make a multimodal journey by public transport in the next year.

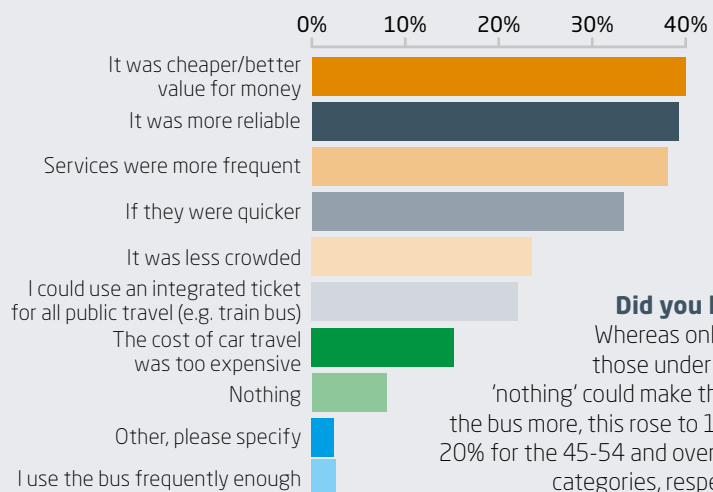


Uncompetitive journey times (particularly when compared to other modes) were the biggest reason why people were put off from travelling by bus.



The **cost of fares** was another important factor consistent across age groups and income levels, while frequency, convenience/availability of routes, reliability and comfort were also important factors.

What would you make you use the bus more often?



Did you know?: Whereas only 5% of those under 44 said 'nothing' could make them use the bus more, this rose to 11% and 20% for the 45-54 and over 55 age categories, respectively.

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with four statements, regarding what would make them likely to travel more often on buses.

I would use buses more often if...



There was no other way of getting there: **64% agreed** (versus **15%** who **disagreed**).



The nearest bus stop was closer: **50% agreed** (versus **22%** who **disagreed**).



It was easier to find timetable/route information: **56% agreed** (versus **15%** who **disagreed**).



The cost of fuel/driving kept increasing: **57% agreed** (versus **16%** who **disagreed**).

It is striking that for all four questions, agreement was markedly stronger amongst those aged up to 44 than those aged 45 and over.

For example, route information was a factor for 62% of 16 to 24 year olds but only 40% of those aged over 55.

The rising cost of car ownership was a factor for 63% of 25 to 34 year olds but only 42% of those aged over 55.

Delivery models

The National Bus Strategy, alongside the Transport Committee and County Councils Network’s reports emphasise how different models of delivery can potentially empower local authorities to improve services in their areas. This includes consideration of enhanced partnerships, franchising and municipal bus companies.

Enhanced Partnerships

Enhanced partnerships (EPs) are the default position for most councils in England. This is an agreement between a local authority and local bus operators to work jointly to improve local bus services. It gives local authorities a degree of influence over service and operational changes, but only on supported services.

Local authorities can influence multi-operator ticketing, vehicle standards or fares.

All EEH local authorities have established or published a notice to have in place arrangements to have an EP board or forum. The purpose of these is to act as a decision-making body to set future aims and objectives, develop and make policy recommendations about bus priorities, operational changes for the improvement of the local bus network and to act as a consultee on any changes in policies such as the Local Transport Plan and Local Plan.

Hertfordshire County Councils was the first local authority in England to establish a partnership (Intalink) back in 1999, which later became an Enhanced Partnership in April 2020.

County Councils Network’s analysis suggests that Enhanced Partnerships are likely to be the most viable operating and improvement model for most areas, however they are unlikely to deliver transformational change.

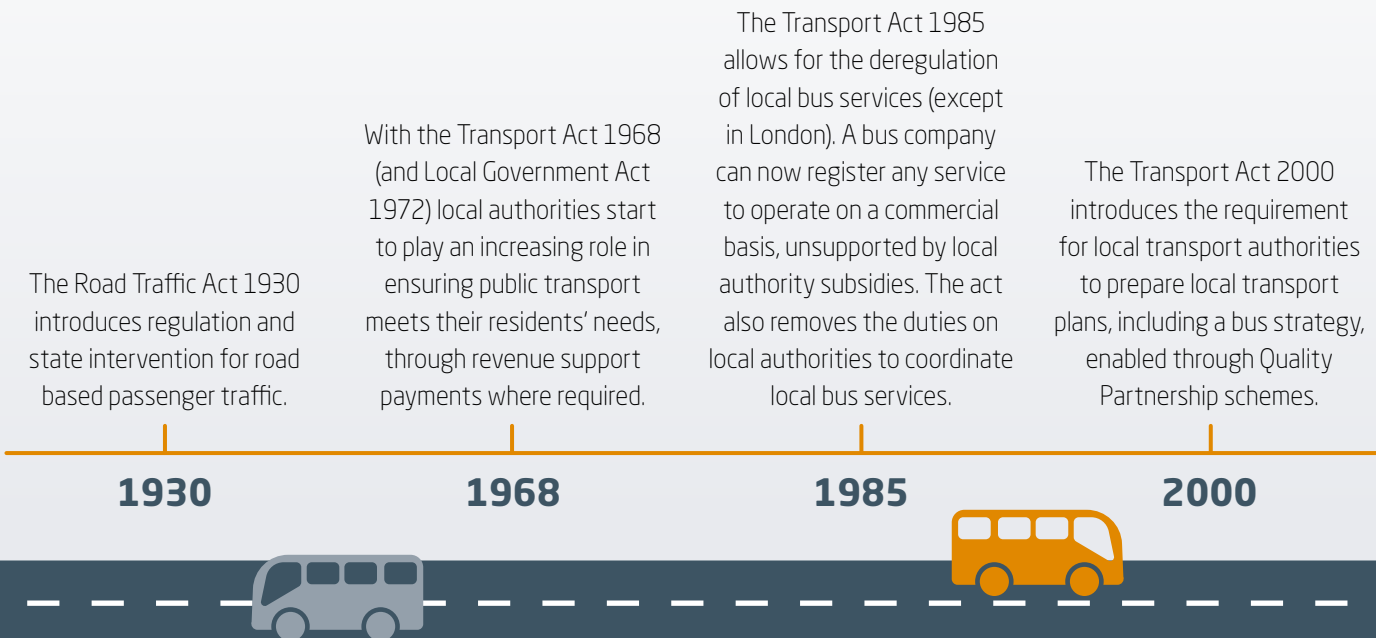
Franchising

Under franchising, local bus service specifications are set out by the transport authority and are offered to bus operating companies to run as a tendered contract.

Current government policy states that mayoral combined authorities are automatically allowed to franchise, with other authorities having to seek permission from the government.

Potential weaknesses of franchising include a likely increase in administrative costs, a negative impact on operators of non-franchised services in neighbouring authorities, and the risk that ticket revenue doesn’t match operating costs.

Timeline: How the bus landscape has changed over the last 100 years.



However, the County Councils Network’s analysis also suggests potential benefits of franchising for more rural areas. These are:

- Tendering for supported services would be replaced by in-house franchising, potentially with higher reliability standards.
- Less risk from commercial services being withdrawn at short notice. Potential to merge a bus franchising team with a supported bus service team, a demand responsive transport team and a Park & Ride team, reducing duplication and encouraging integration.
- Profitable routes would cross-subsidise supported services.

Within the EEH region, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is preparing an assessment of a proposed bus franchising scheme as compared to an enhanced partnership.

In an update in August 2023, Mayor Dr Nik Johnson, said: “Whilst there are very appealing options available to us offering vastly more control over local services, it’s important to stress that there are no silver bullets when it comes to improving the bus network. That said, my view is that there’s a clear route ahead of us, with the Combined Authority now taking the necessary steps to find out whether ‘franchising’ or an ‘enhanced partnership’ can get us to a place where, as a region, as residents, and as an economy, we have the high-quality bus services we need, want, and deserve.

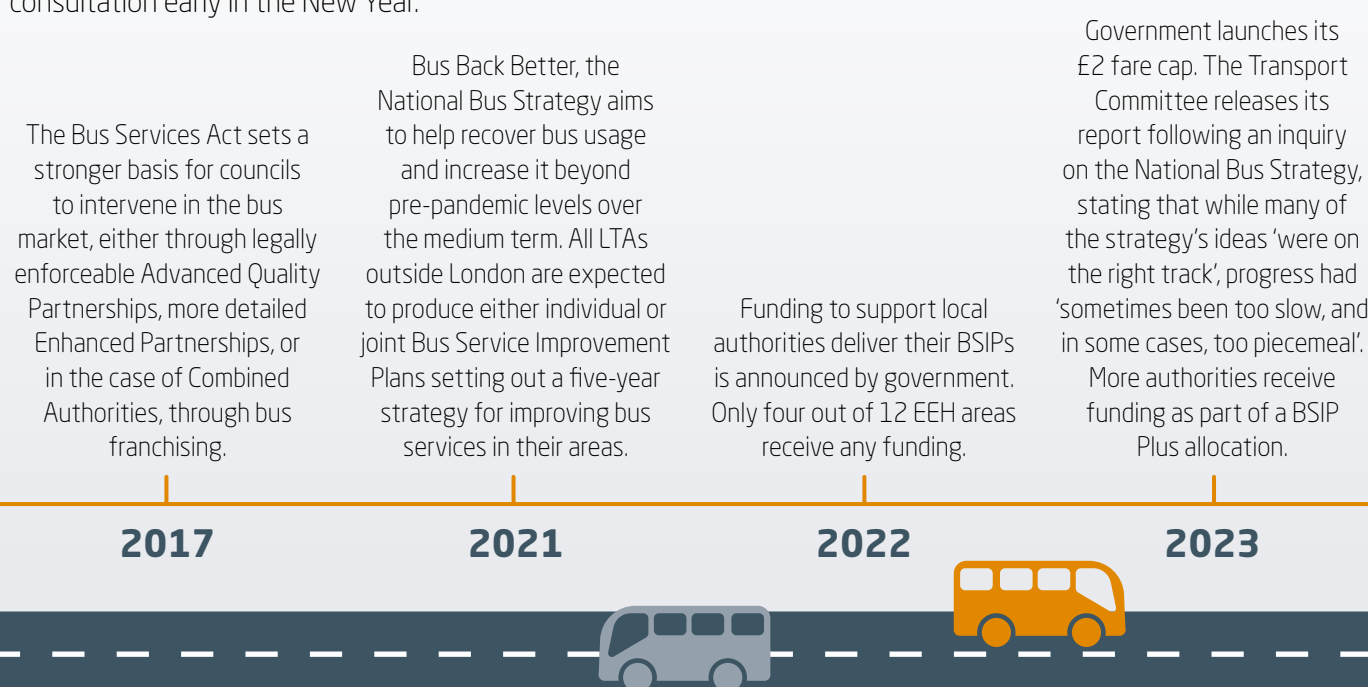
“As for next steps, we anticipate having completed the required preparations, including an independent audit of what’s known as the ‘Outline Business Case’, in time to launch what promises to be a major public consultation early in the New Year.”

Case study: The Bee Network

Greater Manchester has an extensive bus network covering approximately 57.5 million miles, supporting an annual ridership of 186.7 million passengers and includes over 719 commercial and subsidised services, provided by over 35 operators. Under an agreed franchising model, TfGM will now take on responsibility for overseeing routes, frequencies, timetables, fares, and quality standards, with bus services being operated under contract by private companies through a competitive tendering process. The estimated cost of this franchising model is £134 million over five years.

Municipal Bus Companies

The 2017 Bus Services Act prevents a council from forming a new council owned or municipal bus company. However, it may be possible for a council to buy an existing bus company if there is no other industry interest. The government has committed to publishing a call for evidence, as the first part of a review into whether it remains right that local authorities cannot set up new municipal bus companies. A potential disadvantage of municipal bus companies is the high initial capital costs and potential risk of increasing operating costs; however, a local authority would gain complete control of the routes it operates and could reinvest any profits directly back into the network.



Viewpoints: opportunities for change



The Transport Committee and County Council Network both offer recommendations which broadly fall into two areas: changes to the system and changes to services. These have been summarised below, alongside the evidence which informed them.

System

Bus service improvement funding

The County Council Network¹ estimates that between 2009/10 and 2021/22, central and local government financial support for buses fell by around 32% in real terms (after adjusting for inflation). In 2022 the government announced the recipients of a total of £1.1bn in funding to help local authorities realise the ambitions of their Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIP). Only four EEH authorities received any funding.

While smaller sums of money were awarded as part of the BSIP-plus allocations in 2023, the funding awarded often fell significantly short of what was requested by authorities. Just 10.2% of the total funded requested was ultimately received by County Council Network member councils to-date.

In May 2022, Cllr Steven Broadbent, of Buckinghamshire Council, told the Transport Committee his authority had put together a BSIP bid 'in excess of £50 million'. It received no BSIP funding (though it did later receive £1.3m of the 2023 BSIP-plus funding).

Cllr Broadbent told the committee: "The stark reality is that, without additional funding, we will be playing around the edges to try to make things more attractive, rather than creating the step change to achieve the shift that we wanted to make through the plan."

The Transport Committee said there should be a firm commitment to make available significant further funding to support the implementation of the National Bus Strategy. This demand was reiterated by the County Council Network, which said funding had favoured urban metropolitan areas and specific larger schemes. It called for more transparency on the way funding is allocated and favoured allocations based on need.

In its response to the Transport Committee, in March 2023, government said it has commissioned a Bus Transformation evaluation to examine the effectiveness of BSIPs and the types of interventions which improve services. This is due in 2025, but where possible, government will share learnings at interim stages.

¹ Seven EEH authorities are CCN members: Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, West Northamptonshire, North Northamptonshire, Central Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

Enhanced Partnerships

The Transport Committee's report stated bringing more coherence and collaboration between local transport authorities and bus operators to local bus services is undoubtedly a good idea. However, it said Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) are a largely untested way to do this and that the government must carefully monitor how well they are working to ensure appropriate contingencies are in place.

In response, the government said it is working closely with LTAs and bus operators to monitor how well they are working. It added that individual LTAs can switch to a franchising model at any time, though non-mayoral combined authorities would need to apply to the Secretary of State for franchising powers and demonstrate how this would provide more benefits more quickly for local people than an EP.

Baroness Vere, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, on local authorities' relationship with bus operators

"There is a shift of power between the operators and local authorities. What we now need to ensure is that the local authorities recognise that they have a lot more power than they used to have, and they need to get the best outcomes for their local residents. That is what is going to take time to come through, and I really support them in doing what they can to make sure that local operators do not think on a route-by-route basis but think about the network as a whole."

Baroness Vere gave evidence to the transport committee



Franchising

In the National Bus Strategy, the government supported the use of franchising 'where it is in the best interests of passengers' and promised to 'strengthen' statutory guidance on franchising. The Local Government Association argued in its evidence to the Transport Committee inquiry that all local authorities should have the right to decide whether they would like to pursue the franchising model, rather than just mayoral combined authorities.

The County Councils Network says there would potentially be numerous benefits to franchising in county areas, with councils in control of routes, frequencies and fares. However, it says that franchising is complex, and the nature of county bus services with the networks and number of buses operating at a relatively small scale may not always be conducive to its introduction. While franchising may not be suitable for all areas, it should be more easily available to county areas that wish to pursue it, whether alone or in collaboration with neighbouring authorities.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have also called for all authorities to be able to franchise.

Government minister for the Department for Transport Baroness Vere told the Transport Committee that franchising 'is quite a lengthy process': "It is very resource intensive. In our view, for most areas, doing an Enhanced Partnership is quicker, cheaper and has very similar outcomes to franchising. However, we have always taken the position as a Department that if a local authority comes to us that is not a [Mayoral Combined Authority], and therefore not automatically entitled to franchise, and says, 'Look, in our area we really need to franchise because of X, Y and Z,' of course we would say yes."

In its recommendations the Transport Committee urged the government to publish its guidance on franchising without delay – government said it would do this 'as soon as possible'.



Municipal Bus Companies

The National Bus Strategy stated that legislation which prevents local authorities setting up municipal bus companies was 'ripe for review'. The Transport Committee urged for this review to be completed. The government, in response, said it will publish a call for evidence into whether it remains right that local authorities cannot set up new municipal bus companies. No timescales for this have been published.

Giving evidence to the inquiry Cllr Tony Page, deputy leader of Reading Borough Council, said: "As an authority that owns a municipal bus company, we are in a good position to deliver. One of the reasons why we have done relatively well—we bid for £100 million and have received just over £26 million [BSIP funding], indicatively — is that that close working relationship enables us to deliver in terms of bus priorities and other aspects. That means that the difficulty that some authorities have of dealing with a number of different privately owned operators does not exist. We have some private operators, but we, the municipal, have 95% of the mileage in the greater Reading area."

Cllr David Renard, then-leader of Swindon Borough Council, representing the LGA, agreed that authorities should be able to set up municipal bus companies if they wished. However, he added: "My own authority owned its own bus company until a few years ago. Unfortunately, our experience was a little bit different from Tony Page's in Reading. In order to get the improvements delivered that we wanted to see, we sold it to a private company, which, I have to say, has taken it on by leaps and bounds and improved service reliability and quality. In my view, these should be decisions that are taken locally in a local context and are best decisions for local people."

Baroness Vere said that while some municipal operators such as Reading were successful, "there have been many municipal bus companies that have failed in the past". She said that "sometimes local authorities set up things from scratch and they go horribly wrong and are very costly. That is what I want to prevent happening."

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have called for the ban on setting up municipal bus companies to be lifted.

Revenue funding

The Transport Committee said the government must consult on Bus Services Operators Grant (BSOG) reform and proceed as quickly as is feasible to introduce a new funding formula which incentivises operators to transition to zero-emission buses.

The government indicated that it is working on proposals for a consultation on reforming the BSOG, as committed to in the National Bus Strategy. It will publish the consultation later this year, seeking views from bus operators and local authorities that claim BSOG funding on a number of measures to modernise and future-proof the grant. The consultation will include a proposal on changes to the payment metric by which funding for bus operators is calculated.

The County Councils Network said the government and other political parties should commit to a long-term revenue funding settlement for bus services at the 2025 Spending Review . It should also consider freedoms and flexibilities for local transport authorities to help bridge the gap between funding and expenditure of concessionary fares.



County Bus Strategy

The County Councils Network said the newly launched Bus Centre of Excellence should work with its members on a dedicated County Bus Service support package that recognises the unique challenges and opportunities faced across county areas and that the government should use this to inform a future dedicated County Bus Strategy.

The Bus Service Improvement Plans prepared by County Councils Network members, who represent 37 of the largest county and rural authorities contain a comprehensive ready-made County Bus Service action plan to tackle the issues they face.

Services

Journey times and frequencies

In its written evidence to the Transport Committee, the Go-Ahead Group said a 10% increase in journey time leads to 10% reduction in patronage.

It added: "Congestion also makes services more expensive to operate. The Oxford X90 coach service to London was removed when additional congestion pushed the return journey time beyond that which drivers can do without a break."

First Bus praised Norfolk County Council which has delivered a number of bus priority measures, following a successful allocation of Transforming Cities Funding: "Some of the planned 5.6km of bus lanes have already been provided on key bus corridors, and are delivering significant journey time savings, over and above the levels originally anticipated."

The Campaign to Protect Rural England said the UK should look to the example of the world-leading rural bus networks in the Swiss canton of Zurich, where there is a guaranteed hourly bus service for communities of 300 or more from 6am to midnight, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. This is associated with public transport trips per capita six times higher than the English average outside London. It added: "Achieving a similar shift to public transport in rural England would require putting bus services under the guiding mind of local authorities, thereby empowering them to adopt the 'one network, one timetable, one ticket' approach that makes the bus network in the Zurich canton such an attractive option."

Passenger experience

The Go-Ahead Group said 'customers continue to value quick, inexpensive, reliable and safe journeys. Their own research on non bus users also suggested they were 'attracted by advertising that focused on the environmental benefit, eg, one bus can take 75 cars off the road'. It added: "Non-passengers, especially those under 40 years old, wanted real time apps so they would know exactly when buses will arrive. Passenger feedback has also pointed to the importance of waiting facilities."

However, First Bus said it is vital that BSIPs and Enhanced Partnerships continue to emphasise bus priority measures, complementary traffic management and car parking policies, in order to deliver long-term sustainable change. It warned against using funding to support new bus stations or shelters 'that do little to increase patronage or reduce journey times'.



Fares

The County Councils Network said the government should make the fare cap scheme permanent, amending it to a 'journey scheme' allowing passengers to make one interchange on a bus journey. It said the nature of bus services in county areas means that passengers often must change to a different route within a journey to reach their destination, and councils have stated that not every operator had implemented the policy.

Travel patterns

Arriva told the Transport Committee: "The bus sector, and policymakers, can hope for things to return to 'normal', or we can respond to the evolved needs of passengers and communities, for example catering for those who previously commuted into city centres five days per week but now are spending more time in their local areas. Bus transport is inherently local. Network design and interventions to support bus travel will need to reflect local needs and the passenger segments served. For example, we see patronage recovery amongst students and young people close to, and in some instances exceeding, pre-pandemic levels while concessionary customers are lagging behind. This contributes to varied levels of overall recovery between urban centres and rural locations."

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)

In its evidence to the Transport Committee, CoMoUK, emphasised the benefits of digital demand responsive transit (DDRT). It gave the example of the HertsLynx scheme, which allows passengers within the North Hertfordshire area to travel between 250 virtual bus stops as well as to and from six 'Key Hub Towns' which offer major transport hubs, hospitals and shopping centres, and thus reduces the need for private car ownership amongst those in hard-to-reach areas.

It added: "Crucially, DDRT does not take a singular, static form. This means that there are several alternative use cases, including first/last mile, rural transport, Non-Emergency Medical Transport (NEMT), employee or student shuttles. There is a particularly interesting role for forms of DDRT in employee transport."

The County Councils Network said that a possible solution to reduce costs and increase awareness of DRT could be authorities joining together and franchising and licencing Demand Responsive Transport companies across entire regions. This consolidated operation would provide cost efficiencies, with one central control/call centre and maintenance function to reduce overall costs of the operation, but would take time to introduce and would require significant upfront investment.

Integrated ticketing

Within the National Bus Strategy, the government wants to see multi-operator ticketing. It said the ticketing should cover all bus services at a price similar to single-operator tickets, extending this ticket to cover all modes (bus, light rail/metro, rail). It recognises that such tickets can make bus travel more flexible, convenient and cost-effective for all types of passengers. In order to develop this opportunity further 'Project Coral', an initiative backed by DfT, involving a consortium of public transport operators, local and regional authorities working together on solutions to introduce multi-operator day and weekly 'best fare' contactless capping is being delivered. This work will inform the delivery of a universal multi-operator fares and payment solution across England.



Expert voices

We asked some of the leading voices in the sector to summarise what they would do to improve buses in our region...

Rebecka Steven, Senior Policy Adviser, Confederation of Passenger Transport



Buses and coaches are at the heart of the nation's economic and social life and carry 10.6 million passengers a day to get people to work, education and to access essential services.

The bus sector is well placed to help Government deliver on key priorities such as helping people with the cost of living, economic growth, levelling up, air quality, combatting social exclusion, and achieving net zero carbon targets.

What we would like to see:

- **A long term funding package** for the bus sector which enables all funding streams to work together to deliver attractive bus services for people in all areas of the country. In rural areas this would ensure well connected communities with a regular and reliable bus network to get people to work, education, healthcare appointments, leisure and social activities.
- **Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) reform** must get the balance right between protecting rural services that run longer distances with less passengers, and urban operators where journeys are much shorter. It must be phased in carefully to stop services and operators' ability to keep fares low in the long term being placed at risk.
- **Sufficient concessionary fares funding** to be provided in the long term; and for the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme review to take account of the impact of COVID-19 on concessionary fare travel patterns so that operators are adequately reimbursed and sufficiently supported to keep bus services in rural areas that are heavily relied upon by concessionary travellers.
- Bus operators who need to transition their rural bus services, which typically travel longer distances, to zero emission vehicles are facing great challenges. These services will require sufficient infrastructure solutions and technology developments to be delivered on zero emission alternatives. We are considering this in our **Rural Zero Emission Bus Taskforce** and would like the Government to work collaboratively with industry to deliver a reliable and strategic network of infrastructure to support rural service zero emission buses.
- Government policy should ensure that people everywhere have a good level of access to bus services otherwise passengers in low density rural and suburban areas risk being left behind by improvements to the bus network. We would like to see a **national approach to defining and funding socially and economically necessary bus services**, and for this to be put on a statutory footing.

James West, UK Business Development, Padam Mobility



Within the existing funding and legislative framework:

- Enabling councils to have a long-term funding plan by having a holistic view on how they spent money. **Combining pots** such as BSIP, S106, home to school, social care, health etc, and looking at efficiencies.
- Repositioning of transport as **a utility rather than a service**, allowing for subsidy beyond "these costs us far too much".
- **Longer term commitments** to funding services, DRT has gone from 12-month trials to 3-year contracts, but we can still go further.

With additional funding and flexibility:

- How can **pricing models, legislation** around vehicle size and licensing be better designed to support operations in isolated and rural areas.
- Ensuring that **isolated communities can better connect** with mainline fixed services of different transport modes.

Peter Stephens, Policy and Communications Director, Stagecoach



Within the existing funding and legislative framework:

- **Identify barriers to new bus/coach users** and develop some quick wins, for example looking at improving signage at bus & coach stations, timetable availability at bus stops, clearer fare information and better ticket interoperability.
- **Develop a shared data set across public transport**, combining data on traffic, bus services, car parking use, retail footfall, commuting distance, geospatial and land planning data, to give a shared understanding of travel demand.
- **Consider a 'total transport' approach to bus services**, including public funding for non-emergency patient transport and home-to-school travel funding to support marginal bus services.

With additional funding and flexibility:

- **Establish a long-term revenue funding settlement** for bus services to enable operators and local authorities to plan and market services with greater certainty.
- Look to **address the unfairness in concessionary fare funding** outside of larger conurbations – many rural bus routes are more dependent on bus pass reimbursement than commercial fares.

Mark Fitch, Bus expert, Mott MacDonald




Within the existing funding and legislative framework:

- **Implement Advanced Quality Partnerships** across an STB area to ensure provision of a consistent standard of buses, service information, bus stop facilities, wayfinding and signage, which must be maintained.
- **Multi Operator Tickets** make buses easier to use for passengers and should be offered as daily/weekly/monthly passes as well as singles and returns, as part of any Enhanced Partnership. Multi Operator Tickets should include rail travel, for example extending the PlusBus concept for online ticket sales so passengers can start as well as end their journeys on a bus, with better coordinated bus timetables around train times if 'turn up and go' bus frequencies are not viable, to ensure better interchange.
- **Ensure bus infrastructure and service improvements are delivered hand in hand** to create conditions for success, with well planned phasing and delivery. Continued progress is required to both show and secure ongoing improvements, with success reinforced where achieved by implementing further improvements in phases.

With additional funding and flexibility:


- **Linking the car park strategy to the Enhanced Partnership**, so both bus service funding and bus service needs are connected. Workplace Parking Levy concept potentially extended to help fund local bus services.
- Key assets such as **bus depots and buses should be owned by the LTA** so they can be managed to support local priorities by the relevant operator who wins the right to operate services, removing barriers to market entry.

Get in touch

 England's Economic Heartland
EEH Business Unit
c/o Buckinghamshire Council
Walton Street
Aylesbury
HP20 1UA

For general enquiries please contact 01296 383645
or email businessunit@englandseconomicheartland.com

 www.englandseconomicheartland.com

 @EconomicHeart

