

Committee of Public Accounts

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# Local bus services in England

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Fiftieth Report of Session 2024–26

HC 892

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# Committee of Public Accounts

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## Publication

This Report, together with formal minutes relating to the report, was Ordered by the House of Commons, on 20 October 2025, to be printed. It was published on 29 October 2025 by authority of the House of Commons. © Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2025.

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# Summary

Buses are essential for millions of people to travel every day, but too many passengers suffer from poor services. Passenger numbers had long been in decline prior to COVID-19 lockdowns and performance has yet to recover even to pre-COVID levels; passengers are taking 9% fewer journeys and bus services have reduced by 15% since 2019–20—with significant variation depending on where you live. The Department for Transport (the Department) has ambitious plans for the bus sector, but needs to show it can translate these into meaningful improvements for bus passengers. The aim should be that buses are good value for money, reliable, run to convenient timetables, are user friendly, for example by using dynamic timetable displays, and are easy to access.

The Department's funding for the bus sector has been too complex, with 13 different grants in recent years. Funding has mainly been short-term, which has hindered effective investment in bus service improvement by local transport authorities and bus operators. We welcome the Department's plans to provide longer-term, simplified and better targeted funding, but it needs to ensure that this progresses faster than bus funding reform to date.

Despite major interventions to support bus services since 2020, the Department has still not settled on the performance outcomes it wants to be achieved. Consequently, the Department does not have the data to scrutinise effectively the significant differences in performance across the country. It is currently testing a set of performance metrics which should help it understand local performance and intervene where necessary.

Patchy implementation of technology to collect data and improve bus services has led to variable experience for passengers across the country. Fewer than one in six bus users has live updates at their bus stop. The Department could do more to help all local authorities roll out low-cost technological improvements.

As local transport authorities seek to improve bus services, we are concerned that the Department has not equipped them to make informed decisions about different models for running bus services, including franchising. The Department has funded one dedicated officer in each local transport authority, but this is clearly insufficient. Some support is available through the Bus Centre of Excellence, but this is not sufficiently targeted on the things that will make a difference.

We are concerned that elderly and disabled people have not returned to buses to the same extent as other passengers since COVID. The number of concessionary journeys is still 29% lower than in 2019–20, while fare paying passengers are nearly at pre-COVID levels, and the Department does not know why. There is no evidence to understand whether this reflects an active choice or if the barriers that make travel difficult for these groups have increased. The Department must assure itself that elderly and disabled people are not excluded from bus travel.

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# Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. Bus services have not been good enough for many years, particularly for people in rural areas.** Bus usage had long been in decline before COVID-19, and journey numbers plummeted during lockdowns. The Department took the action needed to ensure the survival of the bus sector, but it is still in recovery. In 2023–24 there were 9% fewer bus passenger journeys than in 2019–20. Bus services have been cut, particularly in rural areas, where recovery has been more challenging. Across England (outside London) the total length of bus services (measured in kilometres travelled) is down 15% compared to 2019–20. The Department has not updated or replaced its March 2021 national bus strategy, which was published under the previous government, to set out its current priorities. We welcome its ambitions for the bus network to be better connected, more accessible, reliable, faster and safer, but the Department is too vague as to what will be achieved and when.

## RECOMMENDATION

The Department should set out how it will clearly communicate its vision for bus services. This should include setting out what outcomes it wants to achieve and by when.

- 2. The Department's funding for buses has been short-term, fragmented and poorly targeted, hindering effective investment in the sector.** Over the period 2019–20 to 2024–25, the Department provided funding to the bus sector via 13 different grant schemes. Most of these were short-term allocations, which has hindered local transport authorities' ability to make effective investments in bus service improvements. Funding per head has varied significantly across the country because of the Department's decision to allocate some grants competitively. Mayoral combined authorities received significantly more bus service improvement funding (£34 per head) than county councils (£19 per head). The Department plans to distribute funding more equitably, but it has not fully considered how this should reflect the challenges of providing bus services in rural areas. The Department has taken some steps to simplify bus funding, for example by combining some grants to local transport authorities, but work to reform its main grant to bus operators has

been ongoing for 12 years. Considering the financial pressures on local authorities, there is no guarantee that funding from the Department will be spent on buses if it is not ring-fenced.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Department should, in its Treasury Minute response to this report, update the committee on its progress towards providing longer-term, consolidated funding to the bus sector and explain when it will be able to detail its plans more fully. This should include how it will reflect the additional challenges for rural areas and how it will ensure funding for buses is spent on buses.

- 3. The Department does not know how it will measure local transport authorities' performance on bus services.** Bus service performance varies significantly across the country, yet the Department does not have the data it needs to identify under-performing areas and help them improve. Such measures might include reliability, affordability, frequency or the number of bus services. Later this year, the Department plans to pilot an outcomes framework which will specify potential metrics for each local transport authority. This will help the Department to understand performance and intervene where necessary, though it has yet to determine what such intervention might look like in practice. The Department also does not have the information it needs to gain a good understanding of what its bus funding has achieved overall. While minimising unnecessary data requests, the Department still has a responsibility to collect the right data to know whether its support and funding to the sector achieve its intended outcomes.

**RECOMMENDATION**

- a.** The Department should, within a year, finalise a basket of measures and explain how it will use an outcomes framework to hold local transport authorities to account for their performance on bus services and support those performing less well.
- b.** The Department should develop a monitoring and evaluation plan for its portfolio of bus improvement interventions.

- 4. The Department has not yet provided local transport authorities with the information they need to understand the relative merits of different bus operating models, including franchising.** Franchising (whereby local transport authorities take on more responsibility for bus services and award contracts to private operators) gives local transport authorities more control over bus services, but requires considerable time and investment, planning and commercial expertise, and introduces



significant financial risk to the taxpayer. Greater Manchester Combined Authority spent £134.5 million and took seven years to franchise its bus services. The Department is testing different franchising models which offer varying levels of cost, risk and opportunity, but franchising will not be the best solution for many areas. Local transport authorities do not have the information they need to understand the pros and cons of moving to a franchised network versus making the most of the current system of enhanced partnerships with operators. Significant improvements can be made through these partnerships, which can deliver many of the benefits that passengers want. For example, in Cornwall, the local transport authority worked with operators to co-ordinate bus and train timetables and introduce multi-operator tickets, with bus usage now 40% above pre-COVID levels.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

The Department should support local transport authorities to understand the benefits and risks of different models for running bus services and optimise how they work, including learning from the pilots of franchising models, providing guidance based on its review of enhanced partnerships, and promoting effective low-cost and no-cost approaches.

- 5. The Department could do much more to support local transport authorities with the skills they need and to help them apply relevant good practice.** Local transport authorities' capacity and capability to deliver bus service improvements is not good enough. In 2023, 46% of local authorities rated their capacity as poor. Recognising these constraints, the Department has provided funding for each local transport authority to hire at least one officer for buses. We think that this is clearly insufficient given the increasing responsibilities of local transport authorities for buses. The Department established the Bus Centre of Excellence in 2023, to support the capability needs of local transport authorities, but its work is not sufficiently targeted to the outcomes the Department wants to achieve and the help that is needed. There can be big differences in bus service performance between neighbouring local transport authorities. The Department could do much more to identify success factors and ensure good practice is spread to areas that have similar characteristics.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

- a.** The Department should explain how it will make sure its support is targeted to the skills local transport authorities most need.

- b. The Department should identify and share, through the Bus Centre of Excellence, best practice that is tailored for areas with similar characteristics.

6. **The Department does not understand why elderly and disabled people are using buses far less than they used to.** The Department could not adequately explain to us why elderly and disabled people have not returned to buses to the same extent as other passengers since the pandemic. The number of concessionary journeys is still 29% lower than in 2019–20. This is much further from pre-pandemic levels than for fare paying passenger journeys, which we heard are nearly at pre-COVID levels. Despite an ageing population and more people being eligible, take-up for concessionary bus passes has fallen. The Department has not identified to what extent elderly and disabled people have chosen to change their travel patterns or whether the barriers that make bus travel difficult for these groups have increased. The Department needs a better understanding of the accessibility of the bus network, and a greater sense of urgency around improving accessibility.

#### RECOMMENDATION

- a. The Department should, within six months, write to the committee setting out the specific barriers preventing elderly and disabled passengers getting back on buses and its plans to address them.
- b. The Department should work with local transport authorities to promote the uptake of concessionary passes.

7. **Bus passenger experience is variable across the country in part due to patchy implementation of technology.** The Department's open data system should enable bus passengers to access real-time information for any bus in England, but this does not match bus users' experience. Only 16% of respondents to a recent bus user survey had access to live updates at their bus stop. Some areas have introduced QR codes at bus stops to facilitate access to real-time information on bus locations. Others are using technology to prioritise buses at busy junctions. The Department has supported trials of demand-responsive transport in 17 rural areas, where smaller buses or taxis provide a link from villages into local towns, with users requesting journeys via an app. There are opportunities to use technology to improve bus services for everyone, but care must be taken to prevent digital exclusion.

**RECOMMENDATION**

The Department should, within six months, write to the committee explaining how it is helping all local transport authorities implement improvements for bus passengers through better use of technology.

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# 1 Approach to funding bus services and monitoring outcomes achieved

## Introduction

1. On the basis of a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Department for Transport (the Department) on local bus services in England outside London.<sup>1</sup> This report excludes bus services in London, which has for many years had a different delivery and funding model from the rest of England.
2. There were around 1.8 billion bus journeys taken in England (outside London) in 2023–24, making local buses the most used form of public transport. Buses are essential for millions of people to access employment, education, shops and health services, particularly for younger people, those from lower income households, the elderly and people with disabilities. Successive governments have attempted to halt the long-term decline of bus services, but passenger numbers fell and the size of the bus network reduced in the decade leading up to the pandemic, and ticket costs increased more quickly than rail fares and motoring costs.<sup>2</sup>
3. The Department is responsible for setting national policy for buses, and for providing guidance and funding to the bus sector. Most local bus services are run by private companies, which set routes and timetables, with some socially necessary services being supported financially by local transport authorities. The Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government also provides non-ringfenced funding to local authorities for buses. Local transport authorities are responsible and accountable to local people for spending on local transport, including on buses.<sup>3</sup>
4. In March 2021, the Department published the first national bus strategy, explaining its ambition for making buses cheaper, more frequent and reliable and promising new funding for bus service

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1 C&AG's Report, [Local bus services in England](#), Session 2024–25, HC 949, 27 June 2025

2 C&AG's Report, paras 1-2

3 C&AG's report, para 3

improvements.<sup>4</sup> The Department no longer wanted bus services being planned on a purely commercial basis and without input or support from local transport authorities. It asked all local transport authorities to put in place a bus service improvement plan (BSIP) by October 2021, and to formalise closer working arrangements with operators or to franchise their local bus network, in order to access funding.<sup>5</sup>

5. At time of writing, the Department is sponsoring a bill through Parliament that aims to provide further powers to local transport authorities to improve bus services and grow usage.<sup>6</sup> It includes measures to simplify the process for local transport authorities to pursue franchising and to allow new publicly owned bus companies to be created.<sup>7</sup>
6. We also received written submissions from a range of different sources including voluntary sector organisations, academics and researchers as well as wider government stakeholders. A full list of the written evidence we received is available on the inquiry page of the Committee's website.<sup>8</sup> Particular issues and concerns drawn to our attention included:
  - variable performance of bus services around the country;
  - the importance of bus services for marginalized communities, and wider benefits including for mental health, particularly for elderly people;
  - poor access to bus services in rural areas, and the limitations of demand-responsive transport as a replacement for regular timetabled buses;
  - early benefits of franchising reported by Transport for Greater Manchester.

## Performance levels and the Department's ambitions

7. Bus usage has long been in decline, but passenger numbers dropped significantly during COVID-19 due to lockdown rules.<sup>9</sup> The Department provided £2 billion emergency funding to ensure the bus sector's survival.<sup>10</sup> The bus network has yet to fully recover; only 14 of 85 local areas have seen

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4 DfT, [Bus Back Better: National Bus Strategy for England](#), 15 March 2021

5 C&AG's report, para 4, 2.4

6 [Bus Services \(No. 2\) Bill \[HL\]](#)

7 C&AG's report, para 5

8 Committee of Public Accounts, [Local bus service in England - Written evidence](#)

9 C&AG's report, paras 1.3, 1.8

10 C&AG's report, Figure 9

passenger numbers return to pre-COVID levels. Across England (outside London), the number of journeys taken by bus passengers is down 9% and the bus network has shrunk by 15% compared with 2019–20 (measured in kilometres travelled). In more rural areas, recovery has been particularly challenging; commercially operated rural bus routes have reduced by 21% since 2019–20. Punctuality and user satisfaction have also declined.<sup>11</sup> The Department has not updated or replaced its March 2021 national bus strategy, which is no longer government policy following the July 2024 change in government, to set out its ambitions for the sector and to communicate when the public can expect to see better performance.<sup>12</sup>

8. We asked the Department what action it is taking to support rural areas which have seen significant cuts to bus services and poor performance, leaving would-be passengers stranded.<sup>13</sup> The Department acknowledged that the recovery in bus usage was particularly challenging in rural areas. It told us it was up to local transport authorities to refine their bus service improvement plans and to work with bus operators to reverse the decline in performance.<sup>14</sup> The Department described its role as supporting and empowering local transport authorities to make the best use of their bus funding and decision-making powers.<sup>15</sup>
9. Bus services in the UK perform poorly compared to those in other European countries. Fewer people can reach local city centres within 30 minutes than the European average. This poor connectivity costs the UK economy more than £23 billion per year according to Centre for Cities.<sup>16</sup> We questioned the Department on bus connectivity in comparison with neighbouring countries and the Department acknowledged that it is harder for people to get into our city centres. The Department also said it is looking at European cities such as Dijon for good examples of integrated transport.<sup>17</sup>
10. We asked the Department what good performance looks like and when bus services will get there. The Department told us that the bill it is, at time of writing, sponsoring through Parliament sets out a clear vision for the bus sector and that it wants a better-connected, more accessible, reliable, affordable, faster and safer bus system.<sup>18</sup> The Department acknowledged that it could do more to set out the overall picture on strategy, roles, funding and reform for the bus sector and promised to do so within

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11 C&AG's report, para 1.9, Figure 5

12 C&AG's report, para 3.14

13 Qq 3, 11, 17

14 Qq 14, 17

15 Q 3

16 Centre for Cities ([LBS0017](#))

17 Q 24

18 Q 2

months, through updated guidance and in its integrated transport strategy.<sup>19</sup> But it was too vague about the specific improvements it aims to achieve and by when.<sup>20</sup>

## The Department's approach to funding

11. Over the period 2019–20 to 2024–25, the Department provided £5.9 billion of funding to the bus sector via 13 different grant schemes. Most of these were short term, which hindered effective investment in the sector by bus operators and local transport authorities.<sup>21</sup> We asked the Department why it had administered bus grants in such a fragmented manner. The Department acknowledged the issue, explaining that part of the complexity was due to emergency COVID funding and cost-of-living schemes and told us it has already taken some steps to simplify bus funding, for example by combining two grants to local transport authorities.<sup>22</sup> The Department also told us that it intends to set out longer-term funding settlements for each local transport authority later this year.<sup>23</sup>
12. We are concerned about the slow pace of reform to date.<sup>24</sup> The Department has been attempting to reform its main bus grant to operators for 12 years.<sup>25</sup> The Department told us it had been overtaken by events and had wanted to avoid any sudden changes in funding that would have adverse impacts on services. It expects to take another two to three years to reform bus funding.<sup>26</sup>
13. The Department's decision to allocate some grants competitively has meant funding per person varied significantly. On average, mayoral combined authorities received significantly more bus service improvement funding (£34 per person) than county councils (£19 per person).<sup>27</sup> We asked the Department how it was going to make its funding fairer. The Department told us that it is now using a formula to allocate funding, which is based on levels of deprivation, population and bus network size to distribute grants more equitably, and noted that this means many rural areas receive

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19 Qq 64, 67

20 Qq 2, 67

21 C&AG's report, para 2.13 and Figure 9

22 Qq 29, 35; C&AG's Report, para 14

23 Qq 38, 67

24 Qq 35, 44

25 C&AG's report, para 2.16

26 Qq 44–45

27 C&AG's report, para 2.14

higher amounts.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the challenges of running bus services in rural areas, the Department told us rurality is not one of the factors it specifically considers in its formula, though it might do so in the future.<sup>29</sup>

14. The financial pressures on local authorities are such that the Department cannot be sure its bus grants to local areas will be spent on bus services if they are not ring-fenced. We asked the Department how it plans to ensure that the funding it allocates to local transport authorities for buses is used for that purpose. The Department acknowledged there is a risk that the money might not be used on buses.<sup>30</sup>

## Measurement of performance

15. Local transport authorities achieve very different levels of bus service and the Department's lack of monitoring means it cannot identify under-performing areas and help them improve.<sup>31</sup> The Department does not have standard measures or defined outcomes for reliability, affordability, frequency or other factors passengers value. The data it does collect are too late or inconsistent between local areas.<sup>32</sup> We asked the Department which data it needs in order to identify which areas require most help. The Department acknowledged that it needs to have better monitoring data and that there is a tension between minimising unnecessary data requests and collecting what it needs to support the sector and evaluate the whole bus system.<sup>33</sup>
16. The Department's evaluation programme is focused on specific funding streams, rather than on the outcomes it wants to achieve. Its most recent attempt to collect data to understand the impact of its funding interventions was poorly defined and did not provide useful information.<sup>34</sup> We asked the Department whether its grants had resulted in improvements to bus services.<sup>35</sup> The Department told us it intends to use an outcomes framework to specify metrics for each local authority, which it will pilot later this year. It told us this includes a basket of indicators including passenger satisfaction, punctuality, reliability, safety and accessibility.<sup>36</sup> It hopes this will provide a better understanding of bus service performance and provide a guide as to whether to intervene, but it does not yet know how or when it would step in.<sup>37</sup>

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28 Qq 5-6, 28-29

29 Q 34

30 Qq 39-41

31 Qq 17, 49

32 Q 5; C&AG's report, paras 2.18-2.19

33 Q 49

34 C&AG's report, paras 2.18-2.19

35 Q 25

36 Qq 8, 49

37 C&AG's report, para 2.21



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## 2 Supporting local transport authorities to deliver better bus services

### Choosing the right delivery model

17. The Department of Transport is encouraging more local transport authorities to consider franchising their bus services. Franchising, whereby local transport authorities take on more responsibility for bus services and award contracts to private operators, gives local transport authorities more control over bus services, for example, to decide routes and fares. Greater Manchester Combined Authority has franchised its buses, and five other mayoral combined authorities have completed an assessment to start the process. Franchising in other areas would require considerable time, investment and skills. The Department has estimated that the transition to full franchising could cost between £13 million and £22 million per local transport authority. However, it cost Greater Manchester £134.5 million and took seven years to franchise its network.<sup>38</sup> In its written evidence to us, Transport for Greater Manchester acknowledged that franchising in Greater Manchester is still in its infancy, so it is not yet possible to draw definitive value for money conclusions.<sup>39</sup>
18. We were concerned the Department was being complacent about the significant level of financial risk for individual local transport authorities if they opt for franchising. The Department told us that some of the transition costs in Greater Manchester would have been spent anyway to keep supported services running. But the Department also acknowledged there are financial risks and that mayoral combined authorities are likely to be better equipped to undertake franchising.<sup>40</sup> The Department also agreed that full franchising would not work for many local areas. It is piloting different franchising models with varying levels of cost, skills requirements

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38 C&AG's report, paras 3.3-3.4, Figure 11

39 Transport for Greater Manchester ([LBS0021](#))

40 Qq 58, 61-62

and financial risks, depending on which assets are acquired by the local transport authority. Other models include joint ventures with operators or franchising just one region of a bus network.<sup>41</sup>

- 19.** We asked the Department whether local transport authorities had sufficient information to know what the right delivery model is for their local area.<sup>42</sup> The Department said its role is to help local authorities understand the options and acknowledged that many local areas do not currently have the capacity and capability to make the transition to franchising. It told us the pilots of different franchising models will help other areas make informed decisions in the future.<sup>43</sup> We noted the risk that local areas do not have the skills to make a decision about delivery models.<sup>44</sup>
- 20.** We asked the Department whether the only way to deliver benefits to passengers was to pursue franchising, with the associated transfer of risks from the private to the public sector. The Department clarified that local transport authorities must choose between franchising and enhanced partnerships.<sup>45</sup> It cited some examples of success achieved through enhanced partnerships, including in Cornwall where local government and bus operators worked together to develop a single ‘Transport for Cornwall’ brand, introduced multi-operator tickets and real-time bus information and co-ordinated bus timetables with train times.<sup>46</sup> Bus usage is now 40% above pre-COVID levels in Cornwall.<sup>47</sup> Enhanced partnerships have not improved services in every rural area, for example in Dorset, where there has been a continual reduction in services and frequency of those services that are still in action.<sup>48</sup>

## Supporting local authorities to upskill and share good practice

- 21.** Local transport authorities have had to scale back their transport planning and delivery capacity to focus on statutory functions such as social care. Further devolution and moves to franchising will considerably increase pressure on their capacity and capability to deliver bus services, which is already under strain: 46% of local transport authorities self-assessed their capacity to deliver local transport as very or fairly poor.<sup>49</sup> We asked the

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41 Qq 4, 50-52, 62

42 Qq 53-56

43 Qq 4, 56, 60

44 Q 53

45 Qq 59-60

46 Qq 11, 33, 59-60

47 Q 5

48 Q3; C&AG’s report, Figure 5

49 C&AG’s report, paras 3.8-3.9

Department how it is supporting local transport authorities in light of these constraints. It told us it is providing funding to ensure at least one transport officer can be employed in each local area.<sup>50</sup> The Department also said that the longer-term funding certainty provided by the spending review should give local transport authorities confidence to invest in capacity and skills.<sup>51</sup>

- 22.** The Department established the Bus Centre of Excellence in 2023 to support the capability needs of the bus sector, providing free training courses and seminars to share skills and good practice for local government and bus sector staff.<sup>52</sup> While we welcome this initiative, our constituents' ongoing experience of poor bus services demonstrates the Department needs to better target this support to the outcomes it wants to achieve. The Department acknowledged that the Bus Centre of Excellence could do more to focus on the most-needed skills and said it would incorporate feedback from the bus sector in planning its forward work programme.<sup>53</sup>
- 23.** The Department's focus, in what it told us, was on the best-performing local transport authorities around the country. This was at odds with experience in our constituencies, sometimes even in neighbouring counties.<sup>54</sup> We questioned why there was such disparity in bus service performance in areas with otherwise similar characteristics. The Department could describe what happened in successful areas but could not provide insightful analysis across the country on what factors enabled good performance.<sup>55</sup> The Department acknowledged that it needs to get better at enabling local transport authorities and operators to share best practice.<sup>56</sup>

## Ensuring accessibility

- 24.** Older and disabled people are taking far fewer bus journeys than other passengers relative to pre-COVID bus usage; the number of concessionary journeys by older and disabled passengers is 29% lower than before COVID. The Department explained that fare paying passenger journeys are nearly at pre-COVID levels. However, because concessionary journeys make up a high proportion of total journeys, the total number of journeys is 9% lower than before COVID.<sup>57</sup> We asked the Department to explain why older and disabled passengers had not returned to buses after COVID. Despite a growing population of people eligible for age-related concessionary

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50 Q 53

51 Q 5

52 C&AG's report, para 3.12

53 Qq 68-68

54 Qq 3, 5, 11

55 Q 11

56 Qq 3, 37

57 Q 9; C&AG's report, para 1.9 and Figure 1

travel, fewer people are taking up their passes. The Department outlined some anecdotal evidence on changes to travel patterns it has observed since COVID-19 but could not assure us that reduced bus usage by elderly and disabled people is a genuine choice instead of exclusion due to accessibility issues.<sup>58</sup>

25. Disabled people face persistent barriers to bus use, including lack of accessible travel information at bus stops and on-board, inaccessible ticketing systems and bus doors, as set out in evidence submitted by Transformative Transport Service Design Initiative.<sup>59</sup> Further evidence from Later Life Ambitions explains how cuts to bus services have contributed to older people losing their independence.<sup>60</sup> We asked the Department about the accessibility of wider bus infrastructure beyond vehicles, for example how easy it is to get to bus stops, and on or off the bus. The Department told us it is developing bus network accessibility plans and that it will build its accessibility data into its outcomes framework to drive improvements. We also heard that it is exploring whether it can include information on the accessibility of bus stops in journey planning data.<sup>61</sup>
26. The Department acknowledged that disabled people have a poorer experience on buses and that it needs to do more. It told us about its various measures to help improve accessibility, such as supporting operators to implement improvements to audible and visible route and destination announcements.<sup>62</sup> We raised the issue of conflicting requirements for pavement space from different user groups, for instance cyclists, pedestrians and bus passengers, with ‘floating’ bus stops being a particular example of this. The Department told us that decisions on whose needs to prioritise should be taken at a local level.<sup>63</sup> We note the Department, at time of writing, is sponsoring a bill through Parliament which includes a section on the provision and design of ‘floating’ bus stops.<sup>64</sup>

## Using technology to improve services

27. Technology could vastly improve bus passengers’ experience on England’s buses. For example, providing live updates on when a bus will next be stopping would reduce uncertainty and help passengers plan their journeys.<sup>65</sup> We asked the Department what it is doing to

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58 Qq 9-10, 12, 73

59 Transformative Transport Service Design Initiative ([LBS0010](#))

60 Later Life Ambitions ([LBS0022](#))

61 Qq 71-73, 75

62 Qq 70, 72, 75

63 Q 76

64 Q 70; [Bus Services \(No. 2\) Bill \[HL\]](#)

65 Better Buses East Midlands ([LBS0020](#))

facilitate the roll-out of real-time information for all bus passengers. The Department told us its bus open data system should already provide real-time information for every bus in the country, that it is working on compliance which is currently at 85%, and that it has work to do to ensure this is used by app providers.<sup>66</sup> However, the Transport Select Committee reported that only 16% of respondents to a recent survey had live updates on bus arrivals displayed at their nearest stop.<sup>67</sup> The Department said it is investing in low-cost innovative solutions, such as using QR codes at bus stops to provide links to real-time information quickly through mobile phones. These have been used in Portsmouth and Norfolk rather than installing screens at each stop.<sup>68</sup>

28. Other technological improvements which local areas have made include bus prioritisation and ticketing. Nottingham and Derbyshire are using interactive signalling to prioritise buses at busy junctions.<sup>69</sup> Speeding up bus journeys can also be achieved by simplifying ticketing. The Department told us that it is working with Greater Manchester and West Midlands to deliver more integrated and contactless ticketing in those areas, and it praised efforts by Cornwall and Leicester to introduce multi-operator tickets.<sup>70</sup> Evidence from the Confederation of Passenger Transport highlighted how integrated ticketing schemes can improve bus passengers' experience.<sup>71</sup>
29. One digitally enabled service the Department has been supporting in 17 rural areas is demand-responsive transport, where smaller buses or taxis provide a link from rural areas into local towns. Passengers use an app to request journey times in advance.<sup>72</sup> Demand responsive transport can provide a minimum level of transport connectivity for rural areas.<sup>73</sup> The Department told us that each of the pilot demand-responsive schemes it had funded has since been extended at the local transport authority's expense.<sup>74</sup> Written evidence we received highlights several challenges with these schemes including difficulty in aggregating individual demands, low uptake (in part due to hesitations using an app-based system) and resulting costliness per user.<sup>75</sup> We pressed the Department on how it is ensuring

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66 Q 69

67 Transport Committee, [Buses connecting communities](#), Third Report of Session 2024–25, HC 494, 13 August 2025, para 62

68 Q 69; C&AG's report, Figure 13

69 As above

70 Qq 11, 33, 36; C&AG's report, Figure 13

71 Confederation of Passenger Transport ([LBS0026](#))

72 Q 74; Green Alliance ([LBS0005](#))

73 Transport Committee, [Buses connecting communities](#), Third Report of Session 2024–25, HC 494, 13 August 2025

74 Q 74

75 Green Alliance ([LBS0005](#)); John Geddes ([LBS0005](#))

digital inclusion in its use of technology and the Department said it would ensure that there is a non-digital alternative, such as a phone line, where it funds services that are particularly reliant on digital.<sup>76</sup>

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76 Q 72

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# Formal minutes

**Thursday 20 October 2025**

## Members present

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, in the Chair

Mr Clive Betts

Anna Dixon

Sarah Green

Sarah Hall

Chris Kane

Sarah Olney

## Local bus services in England

Draft Report (*Local bus services in England*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 29 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Fiftieth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

## Adjournment

Adjourned till Thursday 23 October at 9.30 a.m.

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# Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

## Thursday 17 July 2025

**Jo Shanmugalingam**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport;  
**Conrad Bailey**, Director General - Public Transport and Local Group,  
Department for Transport; **Stephen Fidler**, Director - Buses and Inclusion,  
Department for Transport [Q1-80](#)



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# Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

LBS numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

|    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                         |
|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1  | Better Buses East Midlands                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <a href="#">LBS0020</a> |
| 2  | Botta, Dr Federico (Senior Lecturer in Data Science, University of Exeter); and Chen, Zihao (PhD student, University of Exeter)                                                                                                                               | <a href="#">LBS0015</a> |
| 3  | Bradley, Professor Eleanor (College Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange, The University of Worcester); Howdle, Jess (MScRes - Research Associate, The University of Worcester); and Rose, Dr Catharine (Research Fellow, The University of Worcester) | <a href="#">LBS0019</a> |
| 4  | Cairns, Mr Jonathan                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <a href="#">LBS0012</a> |
| 5  | Calderdale Council                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <a href="#">LBS0027</a> |
| 6  | Centre for Cities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <a href="#">LBS0017</a> |
| 7  | Confederation of Passenger Transport                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <a href="#">LBS0026</a> |
| 8  | Dean, Joseph                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <a href="#">LBS0029</a> |
| 9  | Dinger, Dr Maike (Postdoctoral Research Assistant , Bournemouth University); and Lilleker, Professor Darren (Professor of Political Communication, Bournemouth University)                                                                                    | <a href="#">LBS0002</a> |
| 10 | Eacott, Mrs Rosie                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <a href="#">LBS0001</a> |
| 11 | Friends of Carrington Moss                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <a href="#">LBS0004</a> |
| 12 | Geddes, Mr John                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <a href="#">LBS0023</a> |
| 13 | Green Alliance                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <a href="#">LBS0005</a> |
| 14 | Heydari, Dr. Mohammad (Tenured Lecturer (New Zealand), Associate Professor (People's Republic of China) of Management Science and Engineering (MS&E), Unitec Institute of Technology   Te Pūkenga)                                                            | <a href="#">LBS0009</a> |

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|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 15 | Hezarkhani, Professor Behzad (Academic, Southampton Business School); Tsakiridi, Mrs Anastasia (PhD researcher, Southampton Business School); and Zeng, Dr Fanzhuo (Academic, Southampton Business School) | <a href="#">LBS0011</a> |
| 16 | Hunter, Mr Steven                                                                                                                                                                                          | <a href="#">LBS0006</a> |
| 17 | Kerr, Cllr Emily (County Councillor, Oxfordshire County Council)                                                                                                                                           | <a href="#">LBS0014</a> |
| 18 | Later Life Ambitions                                                                                                                                                                                       | <a href="#">LBS0022</a> |
| 19 | Mackett, Professor Roger (Emeritus Professor of Transport Studies, University College London)                                                                                                              | <a href="#">LBS0008</a> |
| 20 | Rietig, Professor Katharine (Professor of Sustainability and International Politics, Newcastle University)                                                                                                 | <a href="#">LBS0003</a> |
| 21 | Rowlinson, Mike                                                                                                                                                                                            | <a href="#">LBS0013</a> |
| 22 | Social Market Foundation                                                                                                                                                                                   | <a href="#">LBS0016</a> |
| 23 | The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (UK)                                                                                                                                                    | <a href="#">LBS0028</a> |
| 24 | The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)                                                                                                                                           | <a href="#">LBS0031</a> |
| 25 | Transformative Transport Service Design Initiative (TRATSEDI)                                                                                                                                              | <a href="#">LBS0010</a> |
| 26 | Transport for Greater Manchester                                                                                                                                                                           | <a href="#">LBS0021</a> |
| 27 | Urban Transport Group                                                                                                                                                                                      | <a href="#">LBS0024</a> |
| 28 | Zenobe Energy Limited                                                                                                                                                                                      | <a href="#">LBS0025</a> |

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# List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

## Session 2024–26

| Number | Title                                                                | Reference |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 49th   | Administration of the Civil Service Pension Scheme                   | HC 888    |
| 48th   | Smarter delivery of public services                                  | HC 889    |
| 47th   | First Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts | HC 1300   |
| 46th   | Improving local areas through developer funding                      | HC 886    |
| 45th   | Improving family court services for children                         | HC 883    |
| 44th   | Governance and decision-making on major projects                     | HC 642    |
| 43rd   | MoD's oversight of Reserve Forces' and Cadets' Associations          | HC 893    |
| 42nd   | Water sector regulation                                              | HC 824    |
| 41st   | UK Research and Innovation                                           | HC 826    |
| 40th   | Collecting the right tax from wealthy individuals                    | HC 827    |
| 39th   | Government's use of private finance for infrastructure               | HC 821    |
| 38th   | Increasing teacher numbers: Secondary and further education          | HC 825    |
| 37th   | Immigration: Skilled worker visas                                    | HC 819    |
| 36th   | Jobcentres                                                           | HC 823    |
| 35th   | Introducing T Levels                                                 | HC 822    |
| 34th   | Department for Business and Trade Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 | HC 818    |
| 33rd   | Supporting the UK's priority industry sectors                        | HC 1070   |
| 32nd   | The Future of the Equipment Plan                                     | HC 716    |

| Number | Title                                                                | Reference |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 31st   | Local Government Financial Sustainability                            | HC 647    |
| 30th   | Antimicrobial resistance: addressing the risks                       | HC 646    |
| 29th   | Condition of Government property                                     | HC 641    |
| 28th   | Decommissioning Sellafield                                           | HC 363    |
| 27th   | Government's relationship with digital technology suppliers          | HC 640    |
| 26th   | Tackling Violence against Women and Girls                            | HC 644    |
| 25th   | DHSC Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24                              | HC 639    |
| 24th   | Government cyber resilience                                          | HC 643    |
| 23rd   | The cost of the tax system                                           | HC 645    |
| 22nd   | Government's support for biomass                                     | HC 715    |
| 21st   | Fixing NHS Dentistry                                                 | HC 648    |
| 20th   | DCMS management of COVID-19 loans                                    | HC 364    |
| 19th   | Energy Bills Support                                                 | HC 511    |
| 18th   | Use of AI in Government                                              | HC 356    |
| 17th   | The Remediation of Dangerous Cladding                                | HC 362    |
| 16th   | Whole of Government Accounts 2022-23                                 | HC 367    |
| 15th   | Prison estate capacity                                               | HC 366    |
| 14th   | Public charge points for electric vehicles                           | HC 512    |
| 13th   | Improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged children            | HC 365    |
| 12th   | Crown Court backlogs                                                 | HC 348    |
| 11th   | Excess votes 2023-24                                                 | HC 719    |
| 10th   | HS2: Update following the Northern leg cancellation                  | HC 357    |
| 9th    | Tax evasion in the retail sector                                     | HC 355    |
| 8th    | Carbon Capture, Usage and Storage                                    | HC 351    |
| 7th    | Asylum accommodation: Home Office acquisition of former HMP Northeye | HC 361    |
| 6th    | DWP Customer Service and Accounts 2023-24                            | HC 354    |
| 5th    | NHS financial sustainability                                         | HC 350    |
| 4th    | Tackling homelessness                                                | HC 352    |
| 3rd    | HMRC Customer Service and Accounts                                   | HC 347    |
| 2nd    | Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England                  | HC 349    |
| 1st    | Support for children and young people with special educational needs | HC 353    |