

# **COUNCILLOR BRIEFING: BUSES**



**CONSERVATIVE  
ENVIRONMENT  
NETWORK**

**CEN councillor briefing: buses**

*January 2025*

- **Buses are our most used form of public transport.** In 2023/24, four billion journeys were taken by local bus, a 90 per cent recovery since the pandemic. While bus travel has declined since the 2009 peak of 4.6 billion journeys, buses remain the most popular form of public transport, with only 2.8 billion taken by rail, including 1.6 by National Rail and 1.2 billion by London Underground and Glasgow Subway.
- **A combination of moving to electric vehicles and more journeys taken on public transport will be needed to reach our air quality and decarbonisation targets.** While declining, surface transport is one of the most polluting and the largest emitting sector. In 2022, [surface transport produced 28%](#) of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), with cars and taxis contributing 58% of this, down 10% from 2019. Transport also contributed to [49% of nitrogen oxide \(NOx\) pollution and 22% of fine particulate matter \(PM2.5\)](#), down 1% from 2021.
- **Continuing to lead Europe in the rollout of electric buses should be a priority.** Zero-emission buses are quieter, better equipped, and cheaper to run. Under the Conservatives, the UK led Europe in registering the most zero emission buses. The new government should focus on working with transport authorities and private operators to incentivise a speedier rollout.

**Background:**

- **Bus travel has been declining since 2009 as services have become increasingly fragmented and unreliable.** Bus operators have little incentive to cooperate or acknowledge each other's existence, leading to disjointed and confusing services with different routes, numbering, and stops. Profitable routes are regularly overserved at the expense of evening, weekend, and more rural routes.
- **More journeys are suited to being taken by bus.** [Sixty-nine per cent of journeys between one and five miles are taken by car](#), compared to six per cent taken by bus. Given most homes are near bus stops, ensuring services are convenient, affordable and reliable could reduce the number of short car trips.
- **There is a direct correlation between operating speeds and patronage.** UK congestion is worsening – the [average UK driver spends 61 hours](#) in traffic per year. Buses can elevate some of this pressure – [a fully loaded double-decker bus can take up to 75 cars](#) off the road. However, worsening congestion makes bus travel take longer and less appealing, reducing patronage.
- **Nearly half of bus industry income (44%) comes from public funding.** Buses outside London are deregulated, with the [majority \(80%\) of services being provided](#) by the private sector. The local and national government budget for supporting [bus services is £2.2 billion](#), which includes £0.7 billion (32.1%) for concessionary travel.
- **Better bus services support personal independence, help job seekers find employment, and make work pay.** [Seventy-seven per cent of job seekers](#) outside of London do not have regular access to a private vehicle. [Forty-three per cent of local](#)

[bus journeys](#) are for commuting or education. In most cases, bus fares are lower than trains, helping commuters and jobseekers keep travel costs low.

**Previous Conservative government action:**

- **Between January 2023 and December 2024, bus fares were capped at £2.** To boost bus travel following the pandemic and help with the rising cost of living the Conservatives capped bus fares at £2. Evidence suggests that the fare cap helped increase patronage after it plummeted during the pandemic.
- **The UK was the fastest country in Europe to electrify its bus fleet.** In 2023 the UK saw a [76.1% increase in electric bus registrations](#), the highest in Europe. There are now over 2,900 zero emission buses on UK roads, with over 1,200 registered in 2023.
- **The Conservatives added incentives and requirements for bus operators to improve services.** The Conservatives incentivised operators to adopt smart card payments by offering an eight per cent increase in their [Bus Operators Grant \(BSOG\)](#) payments, a discretionary grant to recover fuel costs, and adding some rebates for operators using zero emission buses. In March 2023, the Conservatives announced £4.65 million of funding to require [local buses and coaches](#) to provide audible and visual announcements for routes, stops, and diversions by October 2026. As of the end of 2024, all buses registered since October 2019 must have audible and visual information installed, and there are staggered deadlines until 2026 for older buses.
- **The Conservatives published the ‘Bus Back Better’ strategy in 2021.** It outlined plans for contactless payments, in-route information, and enhanced partnerships to improve services. They also pledged £3 billion for new bus lanes, 4,000 zero emission buses, more weekend and evening services, and integrated ticketing. Not everything in the strategy was implemented because the funding was lowered to £1.4 billion.
- **Addressing the speed and reliability of services was a key part of the Conservatives bus strategy.** Bus speed, patronage, and ticket revenue are all inextricably correlated. The Conservatives had pledged to fund new bus priority measures, like bus lanes, to speed up services. The previous government also gave [councils the power to enforce moving traffic offences](#), such as driving in bus lanes and stopping in yellow boxes.

**Labour’s plans:**

- **Labour planned to set new targets for the number of journeys completed by public transport.** Prior to the general election, Labour committed to set ‘modal shift’ targets to increase journeys taken by public transport and lower the UK’s transport emissions.
- **Labour has increased the bus fare cap from £2 to £3 until December 2025.** In the Autumn Budget, the Chancellor allocated £151 million to extend the national fare cap until the end of 2025 but raised it to £3.
- **The Bus Services Bill was introduced in December 2024 and will give local authorities powers to put bus services in their control.** This bill will allow local authorities to franchise bus routes, giving them the power to decide where and when services will be run and to what standard. The bill also gives local authorities the power to create their own bus companies and to operate services.

- **Local authorities will be required to identify ‘socially necessary’ routes.** Initially proposed by the Conservatives in government, local authorities will need to maintain essential routes and identify services that are considered necessary for social and economic reasons, no matter their commercial viability. The local authority will then need to establish a procedure if the operator intends to cancel or modify the route.
- **The government is still deciding when it will phase out the sale of new diesel buses.** Labour has committed to setting a diesel phase-out date for new buses but has only said it will not take effect before 2030. Local transport authorities with franchised services will also still be free to decide when to mandate their fleet switch to zero emission buses, based on local needs and costs.
- **The new bill also includes provisions to improve passenger experience and safety.** Local authorities will be able to create byelaws such as prohibiting vaping at bus stops and on buses. It also mandates background checks for drivers for school bus services.
- **The government is looking to better integrate various forms of public transport.** Network Rail is not required to coordinate train services with trams, buses, or cycle hire. Labour intends to use its reforms to public transport to give mayors the power to unify and integrate public transport, for instance, through aligning timetables.
- **The changes to the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) look to encourage bus use.** The government’s proposed updates to the NPPF include moving away from a ‘predict and provide’ formula which assumes guaranteed traffic growth and requires planners to build for the worst-case peak rush hour scenario. Instead, it would adopt a ‘vision-led’ approach which focuses on the desired outcomes for development. In theory, new bus routes and active travel infrastructure could be an alternative to extending road capacity as they would reduce congestion and improve air quality – and are cheaper, quicker, and more pleasant than large new roads and junctions.

#### **Ideas and resources for councillors:**

- **Resources are available to accommodate the government’s proposed NPPF changes and new housing targets and how buses can help.** [Create Streets](#), a design practice and think-tank [published guidance](#) along with collaborating with [Sustrans](#) and [Cycling UK](#) to provide toolkits for councils. Their guides include how reliable and affordable bus travel routes and good walking and cycling infrastructure can help meet housing targets, use less land, and provide pleasant and affordable alternatives to building major road infrastructure.
- **Flexible franchising is a cheaper, effective alternative to full franchising for cash-strapped authorities.** Full franchising is very costly: Greater Manchester’s Bee Network [cost the combined authority £135 million in set up costs alone](#). Flexible franchising is a quid pro quo alternative where private operators take the revenue risk and share profits with the council in return for a small subsidy. Councils will then still be able to set standards on quality and consistency and better join up with other forms of public transport, which is currently prohibited by competition rules.
- **Adding conditionality terms for operators to receive local authority funding could improve services.** There is little incentive for operators and local authorities to

cooperate with running bus services, which is to the detriment of passengers. To ensure that operators can make improvements commercially viable, adding further incentives and requirements to funding like the BSOG could help deliver better bus services. Improvements could include unified numbering or working with other public transport operators to improve timetables.

- **Offering demand-responsive options on less popular routes can make them more viable.** Identifying and protecting socially necessary routes will help to stop vulnerable residents from becoming isolated. If these routes are not commercially viable to run, demand responsive services – where buses are hailed when and where they are needed – can reduce costs for the council and operators.
- **Show your and your group's support for bus improvements in your community by tabling a motion in council.** The motion template below can be amended based on the action that you believe your council could take, or to reflect specific local issues.

**This council notes:**

1. The significant contribution transportation makes to our greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution – which can adversely impact the quality of life and public health in [local authority].
2. The benefits of encouraging more journeys to be taken by bus, which is often a cheap alternative to driving and effective in reducing pollution, and the need to make services more convenient and reliable in [local authority].
3. The social and economic benefits of affordable, reliable, and quick local bus services in making work pay and supporting those seeking employment.

**This council believes:**

1. The provision of reliable and convenient bus services is essential to provide residents with a cheap and sustainable way to move around [local authority] and make work pay.
2. Quality, reliable, and affordable bus services will cut congestion across [local authority] and ensure our streets are less polluted and more pleasant.
3. It has a key role in promoting policies and investing in service improvements to encourage residents to take the bus, thereby creating less congested, cleaner, and more sustainable [local authority].

**This council resolves:**

1. To advocate for and collaborate with the government to increase the speed of the zero emission bus rollout by adding financial incentives and requirements for operators to receive public money.
2. To support the creation of demand-responsive bus routes across [area] to ensure vulnerable residents in rural areas do not become lonely and isolated.
3. To support creating a local park and ride service in [local area] to reduce traffic and pollution on our high streets.
4. To work with local schools and education services to provide dedicated school buses to cut congestion and pollution on the school run.



**CONSERVATIVE  
ENVIRONMENT  
NETWORK**