

The decline of rural buses: A Joint Inquiry by the County APPG and CCN

Call for Evidence

Introduction

The County All Party Parliamentary Group (County APPG) is undertaking an independent inquiry into the decline of rural bus services in county and rural areas with the County Councils Network (CCN).

The **County APPG** was established to act as an influential forum to raise county issues – and opportunities – in Parliament and around Westminster, and is currently chaired by Peter Aldous, the MP for Waveney. For more information, see: www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/advocacy/ccn-in-parliament/county-appg/.

The **CCN** is the national voice of England's 36 county authorities. A cross-party organisation, CCN develops policy and commissions research on behalf of counties and provides the secretariat for the APPG. For more information, see: www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk.

Background

Bus services in rural areas provide a lifeline to many residents, but it is widely recognised that their number and frequency have been in decline over the past few years. The Campaign for Better Transport recently analysed Department for Transport figures and found that over 3,000 bus routes have been reduced, altered or withdrawn between 2010 and 2018. Linked to this, a joint inquiry in 2018 into Social Mobility between the County APPG, CCN and Localis found that the reduction in bus services is having a negative impact on the social mobility of residents in county areas in terms of access to skills and education.

Whilst bus ridership in rural areas has always been lower compared to their urban counterparts, evidence shows that bus services have declined faster in rural areas compared to other parts of the country. A recent report from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) with the Campaign for Better Transport has found that, outside of England's major cities, communities are being left in ever-expanding 'transport deserts' with inadequate train and bus connections. The report, which focuses on England's small towns found that it takes 54% longer for residents of small towns to get to their doctor's surgery by public transport compared with those in larger towns.

The Government has ambitious plans for bus services across the country, and have committed to a long-term bus strategy alongside funding of £5.2 billion to transform local transport connections, including bus services. With the Government's levelling-up agenda, and the ambition for growth across the country, it is vital that the National Bus Strategy recognises the importance of shire counties, and considers how better connectivity through bus services could help to promote growth across the country

through better mobility giving residents in county areas access to education and healthcare, skills and training, jobs and leisure.

There is also the context of the climate crisis, and the need to encourage residents to move away from car travel. A user responsive bus service across the country has the potential to ease congestion, improve air quality and provide a more sustainable method of transport that ultimately reduces greenhouse gas emissions – something that is vital if we are to succeed in reaching the Government's target of reaching the net zero carbon emissions target by 2050.

The County APPG therefore intends to undertake an inquiry into the decline of rural bus services in county areas, and hopes that the inquiry will bring a focus on the following issues:

- data analysis with an external partner that quantifies the scale of the decline of rural bus services in county areas;
- the extent to which this has been triggered by reduced resource available for non-statutory services;
- the impact that this has on residents (i.e. access to education, skills, jobs and leisure);
- the impact that this has had on public service delivery (i.e. adult social care);
- innovative solutions that county authorities have put in place (i.e. Total Transport) which could be adopted or scaled up.

We hope that by collecting evidence on the above grounds, and undertaking desk research on the transport powers that have been devolved to combined authorities and as part of devolution deals, the report will put forward recommendations that cover the following areas:

- the financial resource or incentives needed for councils to provide increased or enhanced bus provision.
- innovative practice that the Government should be looking to champion.
- the powers that could be devolved to CCN county and unitary authorities to enable them to better shape rural bus services.

CCN have approached LG Futures to undertake qualitative research on bus funding and expenditure to provide some new statistics that will support the work. This is most likely to feature an analysis of expenditure versus 'spending need' over time, using expenditure as a proxy for funding. Other metrics, such as changes in the number of passenger journeys or vehicle miles may be used to assess whether CCN authorities have seen a sharper reduction in service delivery compared to more urban parts of the country.

Key Lines of Inquiry:

The County APPG invites written submission of no more than 3,000 words, specifically on:

1. The decline of bus services in rural areas, and the impact that this is having on residents and growth.

Points you may want to cover include:

- quantitative analysis that demonstrates reduced funding and reduced bus services in your area, including frequency of service and number of routes in operation;
- qualitative evidence that demonstrates the impact that this has had on social mobility and access to jobs, skills and training opportunities;
- the impact that this has on public service delivery.

2. The innovative practices authorities have put in place that could be scaled up across the country.

Points you may want to cover include:

- for local authorities, you may want to use this as an opportunity to highlight pilots or innovative schemes that you have adopted that other councils may want to consider;
- we would also be interested in hearing about other best practice across the wider UK or internationally.

3. The additional powers or levers that would make the biggest difference to provision of bus services in county/rural areas.

Points you may want to cover include:

- how extending devolved bus franchising powers, including bus service operators grant, to areas other than metro-mayor areas would help to introduce new routes;
- areas that the Government's National Bus Strategy should cover as a priority;
- the type of bus infrastructure that could be supported as part of wider efforts to respond to the climate emergency.

4. The immediate and longer term impact that COVID-19 will have on the provision of bus services in rural areas.

Points you may want to cover include:

- the impact that social distancing has had on the viability of bus services;
- the long term impact that this will continue to have on bus services in rural areas;

- the adequacy of the funding announced so far by the Department for Transport;
- change in demand for bus services owing to increased levels of flexible and changing patterns of work.

Please include case studies where possible – a case study template has been attached to the mailout and can also be found by [clicking here](#).

The deadline for written submission is **Friday 31st July 2020**.

Please send your evidence as a Word Document or PDF to peter.french@local.gov.uk

We welcome contributions from the full range of public sector agencies, their national representative bodies, public and private sector providers, business, third sector, and community groups.

Stakeholders will be invited to contribute to oral evidence sessions during May. Please indicate in your written evidence whether your organisation would be willing to take part.

Follow the inquiry on twitter: @CountyAPPG. For more information on the County APPG please see our webpage www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/CountyAPPG.