
IN THE FAST LANE

HOW BETTER BUSES CAN KICKSTART GROWTH

ALEX MAYER MP



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PREFACE

THE ROAD TO CHANGE

Buses are the backbone of public transport in the UK. For every journey by train, more than 2.5 are taken by bus.¹ Yet despite their importance, buses have too often been overlooked in political debates and news headlines. Rail, not buses, commands the attention of policymakers.

The way transport discussions are framed is different, too. While rail debates centre on economic growth, high-speed connectivity, and delivering the best value for commuters, conversations about buses frequently centre on managing decline. Buses are seen as an unfortunate necessity for those with no other options – a way to ‘get granny to the GP.’

Why? Well, partly prejudice. Women take 30 per cent more bus journeys than men, while men disproportionately use the train.² A poor-quality bus service more profoundly affects the day-to-day travel of those without a car, usually the least well-off and most vulnerable. Lower-income households are twice as likely to rely on buses compared to those earning between £30,000 and

£40,000 – and three times more likely than those earning over £50,000.³ Plus, we know journalists and politicians are far more likely to get the train. MPs like me normally travel to Westminster each week by rail.⁴

These patterns reinforce a political blind spot: while rail investment is viewed as an economic imperative, bus services are rarely a top priority for political thinkers. At best, they are thought of as a local council issue. This pamphlet confronts that imbalance, calling for a new approach to buses that recognises them as a vital driver of growth, key to the government’s core missions.

I will argue that debates around the country’s most used form of public transport must shift beyond franchising discussions centred on London and Manchester – important but not representative of most of England – or, at the other end of the scale, laments on rural decline. Instead, we must find real solutions for the towns where most people actually live, and where networks have withered.⁵

With a renewed focus on growth, devolution, and tackling the climate emergency, and the Bus Services Bill making its way through parliament, we have a unique opportunity to reshape the future of bus networks. This means addressing things like governance, risk, subsidies, perception and passenger

experience. We can build thriving, sustainable local bus networks – not as an afterthought, but as an integral driver of prosperity and growth. It is time for a radical shift in thinking. Buses must be seen for what they are: a crucial pillar of growth, the defining mission of this Labour government.

CHAPTER 1

WHY BUSES?

Buses are the most used form of public transport in England, yet they have historically been overlooked by policymakers. If we are serious about boosting growth, cutting congestion, and ensuring communities stay connected, we must start by getting buses right.

To revitalise the UK's bus network, it is important to be clear about our priorities and delineate policy objectives accordingly. The question "What do we want to achieve?" comes first. Only afterwards should we begin to think about how best to structure delivery.

The defining mission of this Labour government is growth, and I believe that a well-structured bus policy is fundamental to deliver on this objective. Shifting the discussion onto how buses factor into the pro-prosperity debate, rather than conceiving of them as delivering only on a range of social factors, is crucial.

BUSES: AN ENGINE OF GROWTH

A well-functioning bus network boosts economies by connecting workers to

employment, enabling commerce, and attracting business.

Studies have made clear the scale and breadth of economic benefits delivered by local bus services. In September 2024, the Confederation of Passenger Transport published a report, prepared by KPMG, which found that bus passengers spend £1 in every £10 spent on the high street – a total of almost £40bn every year.⁶ It is estimated that £9.2bn of spending would not occur if bus services were unavailable, while "every £1 of public funding spent on a package of [bus transport] measures could generate £4.55 in economic benefits."⁷

Another recent study, this one from the thinktank IPPR, estimates that the UK economy is £2.6bn smaller in terms of gross value added (GVA) because of declining bus services over the last 14 years.⁸ Additionally, the contribution from bus commuter wages in the East of England, where I live, is estimated at £3.1bn, roughly £480 per resident.⁹ And the bus industry itself is a significant employer, with bus companies in England directly providing jobs for

106,000 people,¹⁰ while supporting thousands more in supply chains.

Buses are not just a transport of last resort, or a tool for supporting the delivery of social value – far from it. The economic value of buses is huge – and much better understood in other European countries, where, typically, less than 50 per cent of the cost of bus provision is covered by fares, versus around two-thirds in England outside of London.¹¹ If growth is an end, investing in buses is a means.¹²

Given that we are living in a time of climate emergency, an effective bus policy should also focus on two further interconnected objectives.

NEXT STOP: NET ZERO

Transport is the UK's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions. As the most space- and carbon-efficient form of road transport, buses – particularly when powered by clean energy – can dramatically reduce emissions and improve air quality.

Achieving net zero requires not only investment in more low-emission vehicles, but a shift in the number of people making journeys on public transport. Some 71 per cent of journeys are under five miles, and 25 per cent are under one mile.¹³ While 81 per cent of journeys under one mile are made on foot – which is welcome – 17 per cent are made by car or van (versus only 3 per cent by bus). Meanwhile, 69 per cent of trips between 1 and 5 miles are made by car or van, versus only 6 per cent by bus.¹⁴ Even a diesel bus generates a tenth of the carbon emissions per passenger compared with a car. If every car user

took the bus instead for one journey per month by 2030, rising to two journeys per month by 2050, we could save 2m tonnes of CO₂ every year. To meet our ambitious net zero targets, buses must become a preferred type of transport alongside walking and cycling, especially for shorter, everyday journeys.

ALL ABOARD TO TACKLE CONGESTION

Increasing the number of passengers on buses is one of the most effective ways to reduce road congestion, leading to more efficient transport networks, better air quality, and reduced travel times. Buses can move large numbers of people using significantly less road space than cars; one double-decker bus, for example, can remove up to 75 cars from the road.

Estimates vary, but almost all studies put the cost of air pollution to the UK economy in the billions – comparable, for example, to the cost of obesity – such that even a modest shift in travel behaviour could have profound economic as well as health benefits. In 2017, Public Health England (since replaced by the UK Health Security Agency and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) estimated the cost from the impacts of pollution in the UK at £157m, potentially rising to £18.6bn by 2035.¹⁵ If every car user took the bus instead for one journey per month by 2030, rising to two journeys per month by 2050, the reduction in congestion would generate an estimated £30bn.¹⁶

These policy aims are far from exhaustive. Buses can support the government across all of its missions, including breaking down barriers to

opportunity, keeping people healthy and making our streets and neighbourhoods safer. A 10 per cent improvement in access to bus services, for example, could mean 50,000 more people in work.¹⁷ However, to create a thriving sustainable bus network, we should keep the focus on the key mission of growth.

Key to all three policy objectives – growth, congestion reduction, and net

zero – is encouraging new and different people to use buses instead of private cars. Crucially, that includes attracting more middle-class passengers, or what I call “growth passengers”. This is a common thread running through the policy recommendations in this pamphlet. More growth passengers mean higher farebox revenue, which can be reinvested into better services – creating a virtuous cycle.

The history of buses: a whistle-stop tour

From horse-drawn to high-tech

The first combustion-engine omnibuses were launched in 1895. For nearly 40 years, regulation was minimal. Not until 1930 did the Road Traffic Act require bus operators to obtain licences from traffic commissioners.

Steering towards regulation

The London Passenger Transport Board was created in 1933, unifying bus services in the capital. Following a wave of public transport nationalisation in 1947, the British Transport Commission was created. Later, the Transport Act 1968 created passenger transport executives (PTEs) and passenger transport authorities (PTAs) to manage bus networks in major cities, integrating them with rail and trams. The 1960s and 1970s saw municipal operators at their peak, and the state-owned National Bus Company, set up in 1969, controlled many regional operations. In the mid-1970s especially, local authorities were encouraged to increase subsidies to non-profitable routes.

Deregulation and privatisation

The Transport Act 1985 deregulated local bus services outside of London, allowing private operators to offer services with almost no local or national government supervision. Most council owned bus services were sold off.

Back to the future: reregulation and sustainability

The Bus Services Act 2017 introduced enhanced partnerships (EPs), enabling the Local Transport Authority (LTA) and bus operators to work together to improve services. The 2017 Act also gave metro mayors the power to franchise – a mechanism Greater Manchester has since implemented, completing the process in January 2025, with other mayoral combined authorities due to follow soon.

The legacy of this history means that the **number of buses in England has declined significantly in almost all areas outside of London**. The deregulation of local bus services fundamentally changed how buses were run, with private operators specifically prevented by the 1985 Act from running loss-making services and incentivised to focus relentlessly on the most profitable routes. LTAs have been unable to create coordinated networks or set standards. **Their role has been to pick up the pieces, using taxpayer's money to prop up unprofitable services**. LTAs provide sticking plaster solutions for "supported services" deemed "socially necessary." As a result, **public money and policy has been entirely focused on buses for the marginalised, not buses for growth**. While EPs, as we will see, have begun to reset that balance, with agreements between LTAs and local bus operators, the principle of profit-first remains – with LTAs, for example, currently unable to subsidise services that compete with commercial routes.

CHAPTER 2

BUSES WHERE PEOPLE LIVE

Conversations about buses have become disproportionately focused on franchising debates surrounding London and Manchester. Research papers quickly shift to these two major cities to argue that re-regulation can help other areas rebuild their networks.¹⁸

While these cities can provide important case studies – especially on issues of governance, which I will turn to later – they are not representative, not least because they have much higher population densities than the towns where most people live. And in the case of London, bus operators benefitted under the last Labour government from public investment on a scale which the current one will not be able to repeat. As we know, private bus operators focus on routes that turn a profit. Yet in many areas of England, the demand will simply never be there for many services to make a profit. In these areas especially, franchising will often require the local transport authority (LTA) to accept a daunting level of long-term financial risk. This means tough choices on how public money is spent are needed.

Narrow debates around franchising, therefore, risk sidelining the people who live in market towns, former industrial towns, new towns, and smaller cities.¹⁹ For all the attention-grabbing impact of big city franchising, smaller urban and suburban areas account for the majority of the country's population. These can range from prosperous market towns to post-industrial communities linked to larger urban centres. Many of these places do not fit neatly into either 'urban' or 'rural'. These areas often face similar challenges – especially fragmented services and a lack of the economies of scale that benefit larger cities.

The other tendency of bus policy discussions is to focus on the decline of rural bus services.²⁰ Again, this framing is too narrow, not least because many people in remote areas want buses that take them to towns and cities. The key point is that bus services have declined in all areas outside the capital, not just in the most rural areas. A well-designed bus policy must recognise the central role of towns, not only because most of the population lives in these areas,

but also because research suggests they have significant potential for growth.²¹

VANISHING LINKS

The number of buses in England outside of London has declined significantly since deregulation. Bus networks right across the country are now in a perilous state, their longstanding decline accelerated by 14 years of Conservative government. By 2018, local bus usage had fallen by 62 per cent compared with 1960. Over the same period, rail use increased by 170 per cent.²² Travel by car, van and taxi still makes up the majority of trips, comprising 85 per cent of domestic travel in 2023.²³

While London – which was not deregulated by the 1985 Transport Act – maintained a relatively stable level of bus service throughout the 21st century, every other English region saw a decline in miles travelled by bus. This was especially true under the most recent Conservative government. Journeys on local buses declined substantially from 2010 – by more than 60 per cent in many areas, and especially in the north-east and north-west.²⁴ Between 2012 and 2021, England lost over a quarter (27 per cent) of its bus services – amounting to more than 4,800 routes.²⁵ By 2024, there will be 1.2bn fewer annual bus journeys than in 1986, and 300m fewer bus miles driven compared to 2010.²⁶

Research from the University of Leeds has found that, over the past decade, bus mileage has fallen by 48 per cent in urban areas and 52 per cent rurally. In places like Shrewsbury, a town of more than 70,000 people, the complete absence of Sunday bus services is symptomatic of this wider crisis.²⁷

The pandemic exacerbated the trend. Around 3,300 bus routes have been lost since 2020/21.²⁸ Passenger journeys on local buses remain below pre-pandemic levels in 14 out of 20 regions, although recovery rates vary wildly; in Hertfordshire, ridership is just 63 per cent of pre-pandemic levels, while in Central Bedfordshire, it has rebounded to 116 per cent.²⁹ Travel patterns have changed: in many places, the number of individual passengers matches or has surpassed pre-pandemic levels, but the number of journeys per passenger has declined. In short, people are making fewer trips.³⁰ The most obvious explanation is the increase in home working: use of all public transport is now significantly lower on weekdays.³¹ Consequently, we need to encourage new people – especially “growth passengers” – to switch to buses for other journeys, and not just use them for work. This has begun to happen with trains, with operators making a higher share of revenue from leisure travel than in the past.

CHAPTER 3

THE BUS SERVICES BILL: AN OPPORTUNITY

The Bus Services Bill focuses on the government's five-point plan to build better bus networks across England:

1. Extending bus franchising powers to all communities and places.
2. Accelerating the franchising process.
3. Removing the ban on publicly owned bus companies.
4. Stepping in to safeguard bus networks with accountability and higher standards.
5. Empowering LTAs and reforming funding.

Prioritising buses early on in this parliament, and the specific powers included in the bill – such as simplifying the franchising process – are positive steps. Plenty has been written about Greater Manchester-style franchising, and I welcome plans to make the process easier.

But such franchising is not a silver bullet. It can be a useful tool, but it is far from the only one – and it will not be right everywhere. We should focus on the end goals of improving passenger numbers, governance, funding, and

capacity. Crucially, we must listen to what existing and potential passengers actually want.³²

WHO'S IN THE DRIVING SEAT?

THE CASE FOR PASSENGER TRANSPORT EXECUTIVES

In most of the country, bus services suffer from a complex web of divided responsibilities between private operators, local councils – with differing remits – mayoral combined authorities, central government, and even town and parish councils. This results in fragmented decision-making, perverse incentives, underfunding, and a lack of strategic vision – as exemplified in areas like the West of England and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, where overlapping jurisdictions create confusion and deadlock.

The situation will only become more disjointed as strategic authorities (SAs) begin taking transport powers from local authorities. For example, Southend-on-Sea unitary authority, which is currently both a transport and

a highways authority, faces having its powers split, with the new strategic authority (Greater Essex mayoral combined authority) becoming the transport authority – which will manage most capital spending – while Southend remains the highways authority, controlling key operational elements. This division threatens to hinder delivery and growth, further complicating an already inefficient system.

The governance of buses outside London requires significant reform. To better join up the provision of public transport, I believe ministers should encourage the creation of more passenger transport executives (PTEs) and their equivalents, and give all strategic authorities the power to become PTEs – either through the Bus Services Bill or through the upcoming English Devolution Bill.

PTEs were established in some larger urban areas by the Transport Act of 1968 under a Labour government. Where they coincide with mayoral combined authorities (MCAs), as in Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, their functions have been absorbed into MCAs. However, other places with MCAs – including Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the West of England and two of the newest MCAs (York and North Yorkshire and the East Midlands) – never had PTEs in the first place.

The key benefit of PTEs is joined-up decision-making. Instead of multiple authorities making disjointed investments, a single, accountable body ensures that funding and planning align with passenger needs. These features could prevent inefficiencies in the

government's present plan, including that one player (the strategic authority) can be responsible for funding improvements such as a bus lane, while another (the unitary authority) reaps the benefits in revenue terms. According to the plans for SAs set out in the English devolution white paper, the SA, tasked with growing passenger numbers, will not own or manage any of the bus stops. Unitary authorities would still be responsible for socially necessary journeys, but not obliged to pay for them.

PTEs resolve much of this disjuncture, centralising key decisions, accelerating innovation focused on boosting patronage, and unlocking regional growth. Crucially, they help avoid the paralysis seen in some MCAs, where fragmented responsibilities have slowed progress. A more streamlined and empowered model – particularly under the leadership of strong mayors – could harness the benefits of regional devolution (with all of the electoral benefits that could bring).

I propose we establish each new strategic authority as a PTE with real powers to:

- Establish and run 'enhanced partnerships' or franchises, as appropriate.
- Take on Highways Authority powers on all roads with bus routes.
- Raise and allocate resources through a charge on council tax bills and a mandated transport levy.
- Take over the costs and revenue for all publicly owned bus transport infrastructure (including bus stops and bus stations) to ensure consistent investment and maintenance.

Without these reforms, fragmented governance will persist, undermining improvement efforts and discouraging long-term investment. Crucially, new PTEs must cover areas large enough to raise significant farebox income. Frustratingly, the government currently has no plan to publish guidance on establishing new PTEs, and claims that setting one up would require primary legislation. Meanwhile, the English devolution white paper proposes granting additional transport powers to SAs but does not mention PTEs. The government should include provision for each new SA to serve as a PTE in the Bus Services Bill, or, failing that, the English Devolution Bill.

THE CASE FOR ENHANCED PARTNERSHIPS (PLUS)

Enhanced partnerships (EPs) are agreements between local transport authorities and bus operators to improve service standards. Under an EP, the local transport authority can specify certain details of provision, such as timetables and multi-ticket operating, but private operators have a greater role in designing services than in a franchising model.

EPs have delivered positive outcomes in areas like Portsmouth and Cornwall. Portsmouth city council established an EP in June 2021.³³ The partnership has enhanced the frequency, reliability, and coverage of routes, and invested in better bus stops and real-time information displays. 24/7 bus routes have been introduced, and more buses during evenings and weekends. In Portsmouth, ridership increased by 22 per cent in

2023/24. Traffic congestion has been reduced, and air quality has improved because of more people using buses.

Last autumn, Portsmouth secured £4.7m in funding to expand and enhance bus services, building on the success of the £48m investment in 2022.³⁴ Portsmouth's EP is a good example of how collaboration between local authorities and bus operators can lead to significant improvements. Similarly, Cornwall council set up an EP in 2021 and received £13.3m in funding. Between 2022 and 2024, ridership has increased by 13 per cent, new routes and more buses during evenings and weekends have been introduced, and infrastructure has been upgraded.³⁵

Some of the best recent examples of innovation have come from other non-franchised areas such as Brighton, which has already helped to deliver lower fares for young people in the city through its EP, and has the highest passenger share outside London. Furthermore, in Hampshire, which has achieved a 60 per cent increase in ridership, high-quality bus stops, CCTV and real-time information were matched by a new bus fleet, with zero emission vehicles introduced in 2024.³⁶

Leicester city council, meanwhile, has also expressed wariness about franchising while using an EP to generate rapid improvements. In little more than two years, the EP between Leicester's council and seven bus operators has delivered 94 of 100 commitments – including the deployment of 134 battery-electric buses (meaning 50 per cent of all buses in the city are zero-emission), a 25 per cent increase

in passenger numbers, a free city centre service and a common brand.³⁷

The effectiveness of EPs varies depending on capacity, knowledge, ambition and political will. Some authorities, such as the North East MCA, argue that competition laws limit fare simplification under EPs, pushing them toward the costlier franchising model.³⁸ EPs also do not fundamentally address the structural problem of divided responsibilities. But for some areas, as the buses minister has acknowledged, strengthened EPs can be a better option than franchising.

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

The government has been clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to the Bus Services Bill, and that the role of EPs will remain crucial. I welcome that commitment. In particular, I welcome the introduction of revised guidance from the Department for Transport for a new three-month period following an LTA's notice of intention to prepare a franchising assessment, during which they and bus operators will be mandated to work to agree to strengthen their EPs. This guidance is supported by the findings of experts, who say the bill could help local authorities avoid the disruption and long-term financial risks of franchising by strengthening EPs.³⁹

Fundamentally, the choice between franchising and EPs will always depend on local priorities, resources, and governance capacity, as well as geography and the appetite for risk within an authority. While franchising provides a structured, publicly account-

able framework, it comes with higher upfront costs and higher risks for LTAs and ultimately taxpayers. Franchising can also disproportionately harm small operators, who tend to be outcompeted by larger operators, leading to market consolidation. This concern has been raised by local operators in Greater Manchester,⁴⁰ and the government's own impact assessment for the Bus Services Bill said as much.⁴¹ It is important not to limit choice or stifle innovation.

To balance these trade-offs, a hybrid an 'enhanced partnership plus' (EP+) model could offer a practical middle ground. By incorporating clear performance metrics (such as passenger growth and bus speed improvements), this model could combine some of the flexibility of EPs with some of the accountability of franchising. To make this approach effective, it is essential to establish:

- Streamlined governance structures to avoid fragmented decision-making.
- Long-term funding to enable sustained investment.
- Proper devolution – including expanded PTEs – to ensure all LTAs can coordinate planning and investment to introduce measures meeting the needs of passengers.
- A comprehensive retraining programme to improve LTA officers' commercial understanding (see below).

In Labour circles, bus policy can too often be boiled down to pro-franchising, seen as radical, or anti-franchising,

seen as the conservative status quo. In practice this argument about different governance approaches can lead to the diversion of limited resources, political and administrative capital away from the real underlying task: growing bus use as quickly as possible and create a sustainable virtuous cycle of increasing fare revenue and investment.

A tailored, locally driven approach is essential to delivering better, more reliable bus services and driving growth.

RISK, SUBSIDIES, AND FUNDING

HOW MUCH SPENDING, AND ON WHAT? Whether in a franchised or EP system, public money is needed to drive growth and create value. My concern is that the Bus Services Bill still reflects a focus on “granny not growth” – protecting the status quo and preventing further decline rather than radically expanding and improving bus services to stimulate jobs and growth.

In some ways, it was the fact that buses are disproportionately used by women, those on lower incomes and those without access to cars that sparked my political interest in what buses can do. But the truth is that they shouldn’t be limited to these groups – and crucially, it is only by attracting “growth passengers” that we will have a better network for all passengers: granny needs growth.

The Bus Services Bill says it will ensure local authorities list which routes are “socially necessary” within their EP plans, and place a new duty on LTAs to specify requirements that must be followed if that route is at risk. I fear

this could do more harm than good. Undoubtedly, there are many “socially necessary” services that will never be commercially viable and should be eligible for taxpayer support. But these buses often run at enormous cost to the taxpayer. Just one example is the 7A in Cambridgeshire, which operated at a staggering cost of £125 per passenger per journey. Ask someone on the street, and they will normally tell you the subsidy per person should be no more than a taxi fare.

The new requirement could excessively increase costs and bureaucracy. We don’t want every decision about whether the Number 3 bus should be continued to be subject to legal wrangling. What we need instead is to be crystal clear about where and how public funding for non-commercially viable but important routes can be spent. Such decisions must be justified by a transparent, data-driven formula for “socially necessary” services.

A strengthened duty could also mean that LTAs with limited resources focus their entire budget on such “socially necessary services”, to the detriment of the bus network as a whole. The knock-on effect could be damaging to the wider network, reducing overall passenger numbers, or failing to grow them. This in turn would mean fewer profit-making routes and a requirement for even greater subsidies – creating a spiral of decline.

We need a relentless commitment to increasing fare-paying passenger numbers if we want to make buses work. Consequently, alongside supporting socially necessary services, I believe that

LTA should be incentivised by funding agreements which give equal concern to “growth mission services”.

Growth mission services would be interventions to provide services that encourage more fare-paying passengers and network growth. They might include enhancing services by adding an additional bus per hour to bring a town up to a 15-minute frequency – the threshold below which a service is considered to be ‘turn up and go’ – or creating corridors of buses serving local train stations.

In franchised models, maximising the number of paying passengers is even more important, as the farebox revenue cross-subsidises less-frequented routes. Franchising does not eliminate unprofitable routes; it merely shifts the financial risk associated with running the service from operators to taxpayers. If passenger numbers fall, local authorities must cover shortfalls or cut services. Hard trade-offs must, therefore, be faced. To date, the business case for franchising has suggested that the proportion of public subsidy should remain static, meaning LTAs (and, ultimately, the taxpayer) face substantial ongoing financial commitments.

Franchising also demands significant upfront investment by transport authorities for things like contract structuring, legal compliance, and capacity-building within local authorities. Many councils lack the planning expertise required.⁴² But even within an EP, shifting from overseeing loss-making services to managing entire networks requires very new skills. Without these competencies, within franchising especially, poorly

designed contracts could lead to inefficiencies, higher costs, and reduced service quality. It is vital that contracts are structured so that operators have an incentive to deliver quality services, and we need make sure that officers have a new set of skills, rather than trusting them to deliver based on their length of service exclusively.

Regardless of the model, the government must prioritise capacity-building within local authority teams to manage and oversee bus networks effectively. That means, as I have argued, a comprehensive retraining programme to improve LTA officers’ commercial understanding. Rather than reinventing the wheel, I would suggest additional funding for the Bus Centre of Excellence to expand and improve their existing programme offer.⁴³

LONG-TERM FUNDING STABILITY

The chancellor’s autumn statement – the first Labour budget in 15 years – should help slow the acute decline in bus networks. It provided a welcome £1bn funding package, which extended the bus service improvement plan (BSIP), bus service operator grant (BSOG), and national fare cap funding stream, alongside maintaining the fare cap for another year (although increasing it from £2 to £3). Through the city region sustainable transport settlements, the chancellor pledged an additional £200m of funding for 2025/26, increasing the total to £1.3bn for improving transport connections, elements of the West Midlands Metro and West Yorkshire Mass Transit. Extended BSIP settlements, in particular, are welcome, since they

provide much-needed revenue funding to LTAs designed to invest in things like simplified fares and enhanced services.

These are all important measures. But we still need to address the important plea made consistently by those in the industry – the need for long-term funding rather than piecemeal settlements. The bus industry’s reliance on short-term funding allocations from the DfT creates significant challenges for planning and investment. Since the pandemic, funding has generally been provided in six-month or one-year increments, undermining operators’ ability to commit to long-term improvements.

Groups like the Confederation of Passenger Transport and the Urban Transport Group have called for a five-year funding settlement for buses in England. I agree with these calls and believe such a policy should begin as part of the comprehensive spending review process. Such stability would enable operators to upgrade their fleets, invest in zero-emission buses, and roll out smart ticketing systems. Long-term funding commitments also provide the certainty needed to implement ambitious projects, such as expanding networks or developing innovative service models.

This government is firmly moving away from the competitive approach that has long been favoured by central government for bus schemes – an approach that wasted time and

resources. By adopting a more long-term approach to funding more broadly, policymakers can support a growth-oriented, future-ready bus network. The chancellor’s next spending review would be an optimal time to make a bold announcement, providing certainty for England’s bus services.

SUBSIDIES AND PERFORMANCE

We need clear key performance indicators (KPIs) to link public subsidies to the performance of individual operators, rather than fixed funding and static contracts. Tying financial support to performance will encourage operators to pursue higher ridership and improve service quality. Such a performance-based incentive structure could lead to innovative efforts to attract passengers, like better marketing, improved punctuality and better customer service. This model could foster accountability and align operator targets with passenger satisfaction and system efficiency.

The Bus Services Bill should include a provision mandating performance-based funding agreements for bus operators, with KPIs that assess metrics like reliability, passenger growth, passenger satisfaction and environmental impact. These metrics should be transparently reported and regularly reviewed, allowing LTAs to adjust subsidies based on real-world performance.

CHAPTER 4

TOWARDS A PASSENGER-FIRST APPROACH

For buses to become an integral, integrated and truly modern type of public transport, they must be taken up by all sectors of society: women and men, young and old, middle-class and working-class. The first way to achieve this is to improve services, increasing ridership and revenue, and creating a virtuous circle of growth.

Adopting a passenger-first approach requires policymakers to prioritise what matters most to passengers – reliable and punctual services, frequent buses, simple and affordable fares, and a safe and comfortable travel experience.

These are key to delivering bus services that truly meet passengers’ needs and attract “growth passengers”.

The DfT has commissioned research on encouraging greater bus usage, which shows that to compete against cars in the long-term as the most popular form of transport, buses need to deliver on these fundamental and universal transport needs.⁴⁴ Transport Focus’ research into motivations and barriers to bus usage confirms this.⁴⁵ Above all, then, we must listen to what

bus users, and potential bus users, want and need. Key characteristics that passengers prioritise in bus services include:

- Reliability and punctuality.
- Frequency.
- Affordability and simplicity of use.
- Comfort and safety.
- Good communication.

Addressing these areas is essential to increase bus passenger numbers – especially “growth passengers” – and so boost economic growth.

NO MORE WAITING GAMES

Passengers consistently rank punctuality as a top priority. They want buses that arrive on time, minimised waiting times, and to reach their destinations as scheduled. According to Transport Focus, punctuality is the single biggest driver of passenger satisfaction, and research suggests that reliability is often more important than service availability – ie, a less frequent but dependable service is preferred over an unreliable but frequent one. This logically makes

sense. Reliable services are essential to allow passengers – especially ‘growth passengers’ – to get to work or appointments on time. People can plan their lives to fit around a scheduled bus departure.

Despite its importance, bus reliability has been declining.⁴⁶ One in five buses were late in 2023, up from one in six in 2019. Declining reliability could be contributing to falling passenger numbers, reinforcing the need for policies that prioritise consistent and dependable services. So, ensuring that buses turn up on time is one of the most fundamental and effective ways to encourage use, and get non-users on board. If bus services are to be a genuine and credible alternative to cars, reliability must be at the core of any future policy.

LETTING BUSES FLY – PRIORITY MEASURES

As we have seen, passengers value reliability, but unlike trains buses must contend with other road users. Congestion is the primary cause of poor bus punctuality and reliability. Under the Traffic Management Act, LTAs are already responsible for maintaining smooth network operations for all road users. This includes promptly addressing obstructions and roadworks, enforcing illegal parking regulations and investing in bus priority measures.

Bus lanes and traffic light prioritisation can dramatically improve the speed and reliability of bus services, particularly in urban and suburban areas. Dedicated bus lanes reduce the impact of traffic congestion, ensuring buses move quickly through busy

corridors. Traffic light priority systems, which adjust signal timing to prioritise buses, increase these benefits further. Faster buses are not only more attractive to passengers but cheaper for operators to run: a route that previously required five vehicles to maintain a 15-minute frequency might need only four if buses can complete their journeys quicker, with an accompanying reduction in maintenance and running costs.

As we have seen, studies show that slow buses have a noticeable impact on passenger numbers, which decrease when services are slow or late. A 10 per cent increase in bus speed can lead to a 2.5 per cent rise in passengers. While this might seem modest, the cumulative impact can generate significant revenue and provide momentum for investment and improvement. What’s more, quicker buses improve passenger experience, a crucial component in achieving the overall objective of making buses mainstream and popular.

Ensuring such measures can be implemented effectively will, as we have seen, need changes in governance. Through franchising or EPs, LTAs and bus operators should commit to targets aimed at increasing bus speeds and reducing variability, providing a measurable way to track progress. Funding through bus service improvement plans should consider the effectiveness of LTAs in delivering priority schemes and increasing ridership.

Beyond bus lanes and traffic prioritisation, broader planning policies can help improve bus reliability. New developments must be designed with public transport in mind, ensuring bus

routes serve residential and commercial areas effectively. This should be done at speed to ensure that the promised 1.5m new homes during this parliament are well-connected and integrated. The bus sector should also be included at a much earlier stage of street works planning to ensure key bus corridors are not brought to a standstill.

Additionally, bus operators should be allowed to create Tuesday-Thursday timetables – as opposed to the traditional Monday-Friday/weekend split – since studies indicate that Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday now see higher commuter volumes than Mondays and Fridays. This has implications not only for passenger numbers, but also for congestion patterns, with knock-on effects on reliability.

A further issue is the need for more bus drivers in a post-Brexit and post-pandemic Britain, especially given the substantial number of bus drivers exiting the sector to seek more lucrative work driving heavy goods vehicles. Staff shortages can lead to delays, cancellations, and unreliable services. Bus drivers – and indeed bus engineers – are vital to economic growth, and the government should treat attracting and retaining these workers as a priority.⁴⁷

HIGH FREQUENCY

A higher frequency service is more convenient and bound to serve a wider range of people. There is, of course, a trade-off in many areas between service frequency and financial sustainability; buses running at turn-up-and-go frequency everywhere would be transformational, but would currently

require excessive and unsustainable taxpayer subsidies.

What constitutes ‘high frequency’, and what is the most sensible frequency, depends largely on geography, population density, and demand.

In towns, key routes should ideally operate at least every 15 minutes – the accepted threshold for ‘turn-up-and-go’ frequency – to ensure accessibility and increase ridership to the levels needed in line with the DfT’s National Bus Strategy. This level of frequency is considered turn-up-and-go because it means that many passengers don’t feel the need to check timetables: they go straight to the stop on the assumption that a bus will come along within a reasonable timeframe. Other services feeding into these routes would operate at less frequent intervals. For the target of 15-minute frequency for town buses at peak times to become a reality, central government subsidies should be spent strategically to increase the number of buses on key routes during peak times. The Bus Services Bill could give LTAs a financial incentive, or even a duty, to do this.

Linked to this point is service speed. Speeding up bus services isn’t only about avoiding traffic jams. It is also about designing and selecting the most efficient routes. For example, implementing an express bus service with fewer stops can dramatically cut journey times. This will necessitate making tough choices – with the potential to upset some passengers who the bus will pass by – but the benefits are substantial. As noted above, a 10 per cent increase in bus speed has been

linked to a 2.5 per cent rise in passenger numbers – and I would argue that these additional passengers are more likely to be growth passengers.⁴⁸

SIMPLE AND AFFORDABLE

Affordability is a significant factor in increasing ridership, and evidence suggests that better, more competitive fares directly influence passenger numbers. The DfT found that the £2 bus fare cap led to an estimated 5 per cent increase in bus usage across England outside London (though it is important to note that its value for money remained unclear).⁴⁹ This policy chimes with the experiences of innovative transport authorities who have worked to boost numbers on buses. In Derbyshire, the introduction of a £1.50 flat-rate for 11 to 19-year-olds in October 2023 led to a 200 per cent increase in discount card applications.⁵⁰

These flat rate schemes are also simple to understand and easy to market to passengers. The move to a £3 fare cap has complicated matters; many bus companies charge less than this for shorter journeys, meaning the cap only applies after a certain distance. This can lead to complicated chats with the driver which had previously been eliminated.

Fares should be not only predictable and affordable, but simple to pay, with integrated ticketing solutions. Many towns only have tap-on rather than tap-on and tap-off technology, again meaning a chat with the driver to establish your destination on every journey. Contactless payment, mobile apps, and tap-on/tap-off (TOTO) systems all significantly improve

convenience, but the roll out nationwide has been patchy; in areas without access to this technology, fare structures remain a challenge.⁵¹

The Confederation of Passenger Transport reported that, as of mid-2022, 41 out of 115 operators had adopted TOTO systems.⁵² In Brighton & Hove, TOTO accounted for 31.8 per cent of on-bus payments within four months of implementation.⁵³ I would argue that TOTO systems are especially useful for attracting the growth passengers we need. LTAs should, therefore, prioritise the widespread deployment of tap-on tap-off systems across all bus services.

A SMOOTHER RIDE

Passengers want buses that are comfortable, safe, and equipped with modern amenities. Clean interiors, comfortable seating, air conditioning, and wifi access create a more pleasant travel experience. Currently, only one in four buses have USB charging points, despite the growing need for connectivity – and the need to attract growth passengers.⁵⁴

Aesthetics and comfort on buses are subtle yet significant influences on the passenger experience, with operators like Transdev Blazefield's York Coastliner and route 36 in Harrogate having made comfort and interior design a key part of what makes their services stand out.⁵⁵ Just as trains are seen by some commuters as making them more productive on their journey, we need to market buses in the same way.

Well-lit bus stops, clear signage, and up-to-date information displays foster a sense of safety and security and make travelling by bus a more attractive

option for commuters. On the other hand, dilapidated shelters and unreliable information do not make people feel safe. Indeed, in my maiden speech I called bus stops “the window to the soul of buses.” According to one survey, 47 per cent of people say that having a clean and comfortable bus shelter would make them more likely to use the bus more often.⁵⁶

A new bus stop outside Asda in Dunstable was recently named a ‘star’ bus stop by the Campaign for Better Transport,⁵⁷ with wireless phone charging, bicycle parking, a planted ‘green roof’ to improve air quality, and electronic real-time displays. Two stops at universities have gone the extra mile to attract passengers. The University of the West of England’s BusStop+ features local artwork, bike parking and free wifi,⁵⁸ while at the University of East Anglia, passengers have the option to wait on a swinging seat. These are not merely superficial changes: they have a real impact on how passengers feel about their experience. A 2016 study by the University of Minnesota found that passengers waiting for 10 minutes at stops with shelters, benches, and real-time arrival information perceived their wait to be 11 minutes, while those at stops with no amenities thought it was 21.⁵⁹

The government should create comprehensive national bus stop standards. Clear and visible signage is a must, and where there are shelters, they should be well-maintained with proper lighting. Standardised shelter designs could also streamline the planning process. Additionally, onboard amen-

ities should reflect passenger needs, starting with a commitment that every bus offers phone charging on board – a meaningful step toward making buses more convenient and attractive to growth passengers.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Effective communication can make the difference between a stressful journey and a seamless one. Providing real-time information at bus stops and through mobile apps empowers passengers to plan their journeys with confidence. However, inconsistent or outdated information can lead to confusion and frustration. Passengers need better information about when their bus is coming. Currently, passengers are forced to use a confusing proliferation of apps, printed information at the bus stop and real-time information screens.

At a train station, the display boards indicate both the timetabled departure time and the expected departure time if the train is running late. The screens at bus stops, in the main, show a predicted arrival time, though can also show a timetabled departure time. This is confusing for passengers. In many parts of the country there are also persistent problems with “ghost buses”, where scheduled buses appear to be en route according to digital displays and journey planners, and then disappear. The reasons for this phenomenon can include buses going out of signal range, no-one entering information to say the bus has not departed from the depot, or a bus not completing its journey. The government should invest in technology that can be used by all LTAs for journey

planning. It should be a requirement that all back-office systems that feed into roadside RTI can automate bus cancellations.

An often-overlooked aspect of public transport communication is bus route numbering. Consistent, logical numbering makes it easier for passengers to navigate the system and

highlights frequent services. To improve clarity, it should be simpler to update route numbers when networks evolve. A well-structured numbering system reduces confusion, making buses more accessible – especially to new and occasional riders. This small but impactful change could help attract more growth passengers and boost ridership overall.

Tackling the class divide

Class-based stereotyping and stigma have damaged bus services for at least 50 years. Research conducted by the rail industry has shown that while buses are perceived as a cheaper form of transport, in addition to being seen as slower and less reliable, buses also come with “significant stigma, making them undesirable.”⁶⁰ **In other words, concerns about image deter people from using buses.** The often-attributed but apocryphal quote from Margaret Thatcher – that anyone over the age of 25 who travels by bus is a failure – exemplifies this mindset.

Yet research shows that regular bus users generally hold positive views of buses; it is those who do not use buses who have negative perceptions. Pleasingly, this suggests that the greater the number of people who use buses, the greater the number of people who will like them. A virtuous circle indeed. In addition to the measures already discussed, we must consider interventions specifically aimed at countering negative perceptions. An important step is integrating ticketing across all types of transport, with a unified travel pass to simplify fares and enhance passenger convenience. As well as making catching the bus easier, this would also help position buses as an essential and integrated type of public transport – something that train or e-bike and e-scooter passengers use too, rather than a stigmatised service for the marginalised.

We must reposition bus travel as a mainstream, even aspirational, choice by using smart marketing. A national ‘Catch the Bus’ campaign, modelled on Catch the Bus Month and in collaboration with organisations such as Bus Users UK, could play a helpful role in reshaping public perceptions.

With the public, particularly young people, increasingly and unprecedentedly concerned about the climate crisis, **we must make the argument that buses are the green choice.** Research led by First Bus in 2022 found that 43 per cent of young people surveyed cited the environmental sustainability of buses as a factor in their choice to take the bus.⁶¹

CHAPTER 5

INNOVATIVE IDEAS

There is plenty of great work happening on buses which is already encouraging growth passengers to choose buses over cars.

TRADE YOUR CAR FOR A BUS PASS

Mobility credit schemes provide people with credits for public transport in exchange for getting rid of their private vehicles. In some cases, housing developers can be required to offer such credits to residents of new developments, fostering sustainable travel from the start. Coventry council's pilot programme has seen new residents offered between £400 and £1,200 per household in credits for public transport, cycle hire, and bicycle purchase.

Coventry's programme is successfully integrating mobility credits into broader plans for sustainable and accessible public transport. According to a report by Transport for West Midlands (TfWM), participants who exchanged their vehicles for mobility credits were satisfied with the scheme and had shifted towards using sustainable transport.⁶² By providing a direct financial

incentive, mobility credits can change behaviour and support the development of greener, better-connected communities. Schemes like this should be piloted in other areas, especially given the government's commitment to building 1.5m new homes during this parliament.

MANY HAPPY RETURNS AND SINGLES

In the West of England, the mayor, Dan Norris MP, has been running 'birthday buses'. Every resident in the region is entitled to a month of free bus travel throughout the whole of their birthday month. Why? As well as helping regular passengers with a twelfth off their annual bus fare bill, the birthday bonanza is particularly aimed at those that are not regular bus users. The idea is to encourage and embed long-term behavioural change. A whole month to try the bus for free means that West of England residents come to like (even love) bus travel and continue to use it into the future. The phased nature of the offer, worked out in conjunction with operators, spreads the 'loss leader' travel evenly across the calendar year,

preventing the spikes in demand and resultant overcrowding sometimes associated with other free travel schemes. The birthday buses policy also allows the LTA to easily collect demographic data on who is taking up the free travel offer.

A KPMG report found that, in its first year, the scheme facilitated 1.2m bus journeys and that 46 per cent of birthday bus users subsequently increased their routine bus use.⁶³ The scheme was good value for money, too, achieving a 1:2.2 cost-benefit ratio. Eighty per cent of users said they would recommend the scheme to a friend or family member, while 50 per cent said they undertook fewer journeys by private vehicle than usual during the month. As an idea, it is easy to explain, with a strong marketing hook that generates interest and engagement. Everyone knows when their birthday is – and who doesn't like getting a gift? Given these strong results, the government should actively support the wider rollout of similar targeted initiatives to encourage more people out of their cars and onto buses.

INTEGRATION

The government is currently consulting on the country's first-ever integrated transport strategy. The new Secretary of State for Transport, Heidi Alexander, oversaw a largely integrated transport system as deputy mayor of London, and she is now in the position to deliver integration for the rest of the country. This is a real opportunity for buses. Many other European countries have seen a marked increase in bus use by integrating all types of public transport

into a seamless, affordable, and high-quality system.

The Netherlands has built one of the most integrated public transport networks globally. The foundation of this system is the OV Chipkaart, a nationwide smart card that allows passengers to seamlessly transfer between buses, trams, metros, and trains.⁶⁴ Instead of requiring different tickets or payments for each type of transport, passengers tap in and out effortlessly, with fares automatically calculated based on distance travelled. The success of this approach is clear. By 2021, the average Dutch person travelled 0.6km per weekday on urban public transport (bus, metro, tram). This model is efficient, cost-effective and – crucially – helps to ensure buses are not seen as a second-tier service for those with no other option.

The ambition behind the integrated national transport strategy is welcome. Seamless transport connections are vital for linking communities and unlocking growth. A key pillar of this strategy must be buses – with explicit commitments to better integrating bus and rail, simplifying ticketing systems, and a prioritisation framework for buses (alongside coaches, cycling and walking) over private cars on the road network.

BUSES ON DEMAND?

When it comes to bus policy, there is increasing discussion about demand responsive transport (DRT) and digital demand responsive transport (DDRT). The government defines DRT as: “a flexible service that provides shared transport to users who specify their

desired location and time of pick-up and drop-off.”⁶⁵ So, unlike conventional buses, DRT does not follow fixed routes or timetables. Instead, passengers book journeys, and vehicles adjust their routes based on demand. DDRT is a more advanced form of DRT that uses algorithms to optimise routes based on demand, often in real-time.⁶⁶

The concept of shared pre-bookable transport has existed for decades, often through community transport. Community transport refers to not-for-profit transport services, usually run by charities or community groups, to help people who struggle to access conventional public transport. It typically serves older people, disabled passengers, or rural communities and often uses volunteer drivers. Community transport is, and will remain, an important service, providing accessible transport options to 13 million passengers a year through not-for-profit providers. Sixty-eight per cent of community transport operators are making journeys to health-related destinations, and 60 per cent are travelling to social care.⁶⁷

More recently, some LTAs have looked to DRT as a cheaper option than funding traditional fixed route supported buses. This was the explicit aim of Milton Keynes Connect. The council took the decision in 2021 to end many supported bus services and replace them with DRT.

DRT is also being used in areas with dispersed populations. HertsLynx, Hertfordshire County Council’s DRT service, has provided access to public transport for rural residents who previously did not have access to traditional

bus services. The service grew from operating three buses and around 1,400 passenger trips per month in September 2021 to seven buses and over 5,000 monthly passenger journeys.⁶⁸

Within the context of this pamphlet, the above measures are not aimed at growth passengers, but DRT could target those residents. While there is often an assumption that DRT is best suited to rural areas, and some government funding for trials has been through the Rural Mobility Fund, in fact, you could argue the opposite. In towns there are higher population densities, so more people are likely to be in the market to take similar shared journeys – precisely why Uber operates in cities not villages.

Within a wider transport network, DRT can be valuable as a ‘feeder’ service, linking passengers to mainline bus or train routes. The aim of Worcestershire on Demand’s first zone, for instance, was to connect more people to the train station. Looking at international examples offers further insights. The Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area implemented DRT as part of the larger Dallas Area Rapid Transit network. Between 2023 and 2024, the scheme increased its ridership by 10 per cent (the largest transit growth in Texas) and shifted 25 per cent of users from private cars.⁶⁹ Here, then, is another potential use of DRT: to reduce congestion and aid decarbonisation by facilitating onward travel and reducing connecting private car journeys. Using DRT and DDRT to connect growth passengers to onward travel could bring important economic benefits.

HOW VIABLE ARE DRT SERVICES?

High operational costs are often cited as a challenge for DRT. The County Council Network found 95 per cent of their members' schemes were operating at a loss and fewer than 20 per cent of councils said DRT was financially sustainable.⁷⁰ But as we have seen, many councils are using DRT where they might otherwise fund a loss-making supported route. It is therefore unsurprising that these DRT schemes also operate at a loss.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

One undoubted benefit of DRT is its ability to identify high-demand routes, providing valuable data for transport planning. For example, Arriva's Loop service in Milton Keynes was developed using insights from the MK Connect DRT service, allowing the creation of a commercially viable fixed-line circular route based on real demand.⁷¹ The government should explore this further, leveraging DRT to establish permanent, high-demand bus routes.

MORE LESSONS FROM DRT TRIALS

DRT trials show that it is vital to be clear on the purpose of a given scheme. Otherwise, there is a risk that it could become a heavily subsidised taxi service, rather than a viable part of the public transport mix.

Specifically with regard to growth passengers, lessons include:

- One size does not fit all, so knowing the type of passengers you are targeting is important. Whilst a community transport operator

will spend 10 minutes picking up a passenger, someone heading for the station will want speedy drop off and set downs.

- System design: proper zoning is critical to ensuring efficiency, otherwise vehicles will go on long journeys for one passenger and not be available for others.
- Integration: passengers will only use DRT as a feeder service if both the DRT and the mainline route service is reliable and frequent.
- Flexibility: services must be able to flex to meet periods of high demand.
- Marketing: it is essential to explain the service's purpose and operation to secure passenger trust and usage.

An issue the government should address is the existence of legislative gaps.

There is currently no specific legislation governing DRT, so operators use either bus or taxi regulations, neither of which fully suit DRT services.⁷² There is also a need for officers in transport authorities to be skilled up in effectively procuring, managing, and monitoring DRT operations. Another barrier is the limited commercial market for DRT app providers, which may hinder take-up and innovation. As with traditional buses, we must stop muddling "granny" and "growth" on DRT, which can be a driver of growth, especially if it complements the wider transport network by acting as a feeder service to other high-frequency public transport. To attract growth passengers, DRT must be fast, reliable, and well-integrated, with proactive targeted marketing.

CONCLUSION

NEXT STOP: GROWTH

To build a thriving, sustainable bus network, we must reframe the debate. Buses are not just a lifeline service – they are a driver of growth. Prioritising reform, investment, and passenger-first policies can reposition buses as a pillar of England’s transport future and Labour’s growth mission. As rail has dominated transport policy, buses – used by millions daily – have been under-prioritised and undervalued. With a Labour government in power, the Bus Services Bill in parliament and more devolution on the way, we now have a rare opportunity to put buses at the heart of national transport policy.

I have made a series of proposals to strengthen the bill alongside other further measures to drive real change. But beyond legislative tweaks, we need a bigger conversation – not just about protecting bus services, but about radically growing the number of fare-paying passengers and fuelling growth. Too often, buses are seen as a service of last resort by middle-class would-be passengers. Bridging the class divide in bus use is essential for long-term

viability of bus networks. That’s why I am focused on attracting more growth passengers – those who have other options, but will choose buses if they are reliable and convenient.

To make buses the transport mode of choice for more people, we must also move beyond Manchester and London-centric franchising debates and prioritise the towns, market towns and smaller cities where the majority of the population live. Investment should be targeted at creating 15-minute bus frequencies in towns.

Affordability, convenience, and quality must be our priorities. That means better integration with rail, simplified ticketing, and proper infrastructure investment. A national minimum standard for bus stops, real-time passenger information, and expanded bus priority measures would improve speed, reliability, and passenger confidence. Equally important, a five-year funding settlement would provide long-term certainty, allowing local transport authorities and operators to better plan investment in

routes and services.

Stronger local transport governance is also essential. The government should encourage the creation of more passenger transport executives, or equivalents, to better coordinate services and ensure efficiency. I will be pressing for the publication of guidance on setting up PTEs and, if necessary, pushing for amendments to the English Devolution Bill to facilitate their creation. But expanding bus networks is not just about improving buses – it is also about reducing car dependency, particularly for shorter, everyday journeys.

I recognise the challenging fiscal environment that the government faces. The upcoming spending review will require further difficult decisions to be made. But delivering better buses is not just good for the economy – it's good politics too. A visible, tangible improvement in the services that people see and use every day – whether that's more punctual services, first-class bus stops everywhere in the

country or real-time information that is accurate and informative – can only strengthen Labour's case for government and demonstrate that we are serious about improving people's daily lives. If we get this right, not only will we build a stronger transport system – we will strengthen our argument for a second and future terms.

The decline of Britain's bus network was not inevitable – it was the result of political choices. The new government can make different choices. Buses must be more than what they are today if we are serious about delivering Labour's vision for growth and net zero. The Bus Services Bill is just the beginning. To drive up passenger numbers, and build a transport system that works for more people, we must make buses an attractive, affordable, and reliable choice for the many. In 2024, the country elected a Labour government with a mandate for change. Now is the time to deliver it – boldly, decisively, with ambition, and crucially, with buses. Next stop: growth!

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**FABIAN
SOCIETY**

IN THE FAST LANE

ALEX MAYER MP

Buses are the backbone of public transport in the UK. For every journey by train, more than 2.5 are taken by bus. Yet despite their importance, buses have too often been overlooked in political debates and news headlines. Rail, not buses, commands the attention of policymakers.

In this pamphlet, Alex Mayer MP makes the case that improving our bus network is crucial to fulfilling Labour's growth mission. She argues that debates around the country's most used form of public transport must shift beyond franchising discussions centred on big cities or, at the other end of the scale, laments on rural decline. Instead, she writes, we must find solutions relevant to the towns where most people live, prioritising affordability, convenience, and quality to increase ridership and make buses an attractive option for all.

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