

Three stages to better bus services

using the Bus Services Act



Introduction

The Bus Services Act 2017 is ready to be used to make bus services in England better.

This is a guide for local authorities who want to make bus services in their area better by using the powers of the Bus Services Act 2017. The legislation offers a flexible approach with two main ways of working. Either bus operators and local transport authorities can partner to improve services, or the local transport authority can assume the role of franchisor, specifying every aspect of the service and invite operators to tender.

Why buses?

Buses are essential to freeing up congested road space; to cleaning up the air that we breathe and above all to connecting people to jobs, friends and life opportunities. For any local authority which wants to make an impact on employment, pollution and quality of life, the opportunities presented by the Bus Services Act are exciting.

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Stage 1: Take buses seriously

People

Appoint people at a senior level to champion buses. Councillors and officers are needed with the power to make positive change happen. Assemble stakeholders, including bus operators and passenger groups. You will need their help to develop the kinds of services passengers want.



Planning

Buses are the best used form of public transport and the most efficient users of road space. They must be central to transport plans and be integrated with local plans and other strategies, including health and clean air. The Bus Services Act includes various new powers and opportunities to improve bus services, so it makes sense to review transport and other policies to see how to make the most of these.



Targets

Set out ambitious targets to increase bus patronage, or at least halt its decline. The powers of the Bus Services Act can help you achieve this. Compare your local area to the performance of other authorities.



Budget

Buses need a budget. Well resourced partnership working with operators can provide better value than tendering, but needs funding for planning and delivery. Make sure you know and access the full range of funding streams that are available.



Evidence

Collect quantitative and qualitative data about bus patronage, fares, usage and passenger experience, both on and off the bus vehicles. Find best practice from other cities. This will help build the case for using Bus Services Act powers.



Stage 2: Work out what powers are available

Outside London, bus services are deregulated – bus operators register the services they want to run and deregister them if they lose money on them. If services are not being provided commercially, local authorities can step in and subsidise services. However, it has increasingly been recognised that buses work better with local council support and involvement. The Bus Services Act includes various new powers and duties for local authorities (and for operators) to make buses work better. Review these to see what your area can use.

All local transport authorities have access to the following powers:

- Advanced Quality Partnerships
- Enhanced Partnerships
- Multi-operator ticketing schemes
- Access to financial data.

The Act also includes requirements for opening up data on bus services and fares, and for audible and visible information on buses. We cover these in detail in this report.

What is a local transport authority?

Local transport authorities are mayoral combined authorities, combined authorities, county councils and unitary authorities. Where any of these types of authorities overlap, both are local transport authorities and can use the powers in the legislation.

Quality partnerships have been around for a while. Essentially they are partnerships between bus operators, often with commitments to investment in new vehicles, and local authorities, with commitments to improve bus stops and other bus infrastructure and to introduce bus priority measures like bus lanes. The Act broadens these partnerships significantly and includes new opportunities – for example allowing local authorities to take on the registration of bus services (currently this is done by little known officials called traffic commissioners). More details on partnerships are in Annex I.

The Act also includes provision for bus franchising. This means that local authorities rather than operators decide what bus services are run and what fares are charged. Under the Act, combined authorities with directly elected mayors have full powers to introduce bus franchising, subject to making the case. Franchising powers are in principle also available to all other local transport authorities, but they have to seek agreement from the Transport Secretary.

Stage 3: Decide what benefits you want to see

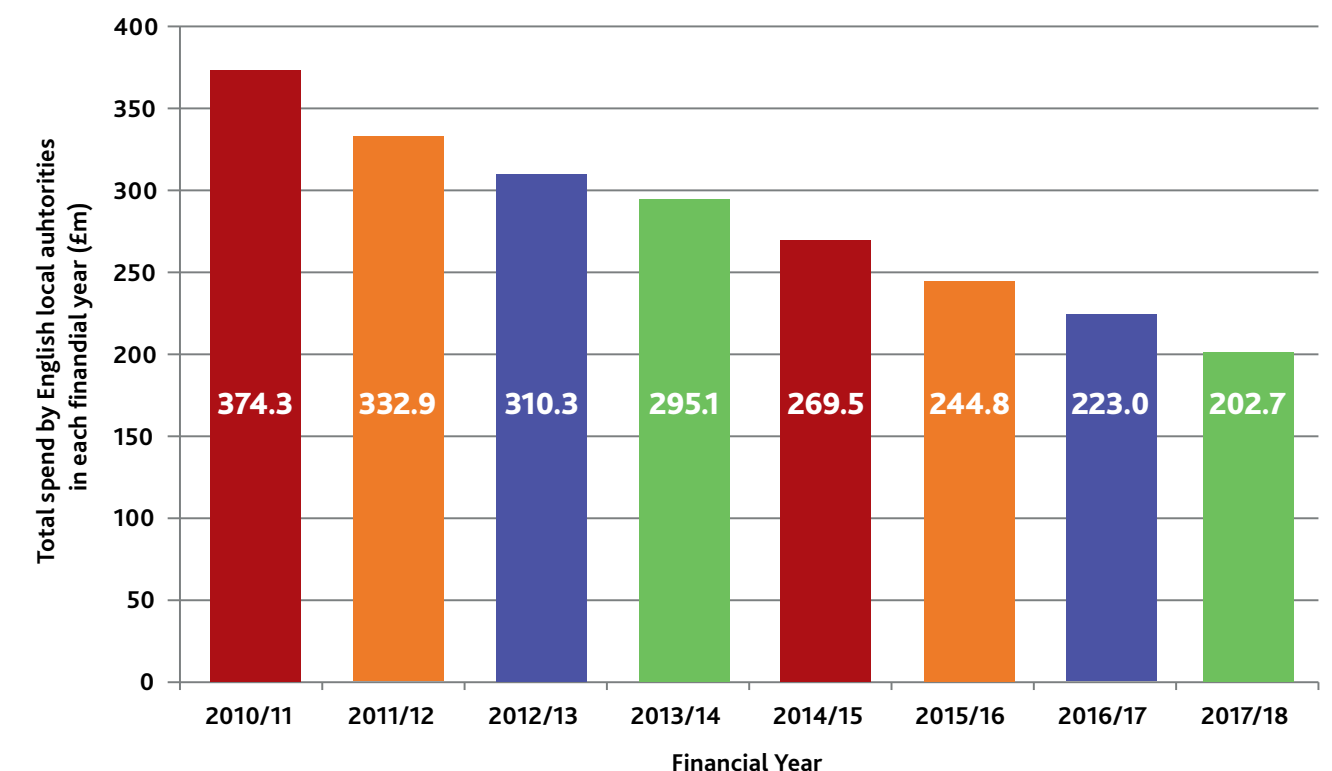
Depending on the transport need in your area, the Bus Services Act could be used to provide:

- More, not fewer, buses
- Affordable buses
- Better bus information
- Better bus vehicles
- Buses that are better integrated with other transport modes.

More, not fewer, buses

Total spend by local authorities in England on supported bus services

All sums adjusted to 2018 using RPI



In 2017-18 **290** bus services have been **reduced, altered or withdrawn**

Since 2010-11 **3,088** bus services have been **reduced, altered or withdrawn**

Stopping cuts and getting an expanding bus network

For many people and communities, the main priority is to stop cuts in services and to have more rather than fewer buses. As we've said above, buses are a commercial business and generally the companies run services where they can expect to make money or at least break even. Where this doesn't happen, local authorities can step in and subsidise services. But as our Save our Buses campaign has shown, with cuts in their general funding local authorities have cut back on funding these unprofitable but socially necessary services. In addition, various issues have hit the profitability of bus services:

- Underfunding of the free travel scheme for older and disabled people: this has been a boon to these groups but the Government funding for it does not cover the costs of provision
- Cuts in grants to bus operators (Bus Service Operators Grant was cut back in 2010)
- Cuts in funding to school transport services, which can form a network with ordinary bus services
- Increased traffic congestion, which means that to keep to schedules operators have to run more buses.

On top of these, changes in the wider economy have hit bus use, including the move to internet shopping, out of town developments and the consequent decline in town centres and high streets.

What are the options for communities facing bus cuts or who want an increased service?

A first option will be for local transport authorities to stop cutbacks or fund increased services. But local authorities will respond that they have no funding to protect or enhance services. So here are some ways in which this has been or could be done.

Communities do it themselves

In some more well resourced places, not-for-profit community transport organisations provide local transport services. These have tended to be relatively modest – volunteer car schemes to give people lifts, or dial-a-ride services on request, but increasingly community transport groups are providing ordinary bus services. West Norfolk Community Transport has stepped in and taken on services withdrawn by Stagecoach in and around Kings Lynn.¹ In some cases, parishes and town councils have taken on providing local services. Witney Town Council in Oxfordshire has helped establish West Oxfordshire Community Transport Limited. This is a not-for-profit organisation, running town services that enable residents from surrounding estates to easily access the town centre.² Similarly, Henley on Thames town council has been subsidising bus services in the town since Oxfordshire County Council withdrew their subsidy in 2016, and has recently agreed a new contract with the local Reading Buses.³

Total transport: bring together funding and contracts

Most areas – even the most remote rural places – have specialist transport services provided by public bodies. These include home-school transport, social services transport, non-emergency patient travel, college and university transport for students and staff and also staff transport for prisons. 'Total transport' is about bringing these contracts together and where possible opening services for the public or recycling funding for mainstream bus services. There were a series of pilots from 2015-17 with this, which produced modest results and some areas are pursuing this approach.⁴

Kickstart funding: upfront funding to bring in new services

Some bus services have the potential for being commercial but need funding in the initial years to build up use, or to demonstrate to operators that they are viable. Operators sometimes take the risk themselves, but in other places local authorities have provided start-up funding.

Access to financial data

Previously, when an operator withdrew a service, very little information was available about usage. How many people were using it? Did it merit being subsidised as a socially necessary bus route? The local authority or other operators contemplating taking on the route would have to make a decision in the dark, or take claims about revenue and patronage on trust. Section 19 of the Bus Services Act requires operators to disclose information about revenue and patronage to the local transport authority when an operator cancels a service. This means that if the local authority decides to put the route out to tender, all potential bidders can see this information upfront and make an informed decision about whether to bid. It also means that local authorities don't mistakenly spend money on subsidising bus routes which are in fact commercially viable.

Reducing operating costs and making buses more attractive: giving buses priority over other traffic

One of the biggest challenges facing the bus industry today – perhaps the biggest, after the lack of bus funding – is road congestion. Research by David Begg shows that in the last 50 years, bus journey times have risen by almost 50 per cent in the more congested urban areas. Road congestion slows down bus speeds, and moreover makes it far more difficult to keep reliably to schedule. Passengers value timely buses, and will quickly opt for other forms of transport if they can't rely on buses turning up on time. Begg estimates that a ten per cent reduction in bus speed leads to, on average, a ten per cent decline in bus patronage.

Bus priority can be instituted in a number of ways. The most straightforward is to introduce bus lanes – either for the exclusive use of buses; or the exclusive use of buses at certain times of day. Local authorities can also introduce bus gates, where rising bollards or gates only allow through buses (and emergency vehicles) to certain areas such as city centres. But bus priority can be more high-tech than this: modern traffic light technology can shorten red lights or extend green lights to give priority to buses. When this technology, known as Selective Vehicle Priority (SVP), was introduced in Hazel Grove, Manchester, journey times fell by three minutes and the variability in journey times fell by

Case study: South East Hampshire Bus Rapid Transit

This is a high specification, sub regional public transport network. Phase 1 of the project opened in April 2012. The project aimed to improve access to job opportunities, public health services and tertiary education by public transport. The new route delivered up to £6.94 in economic benefits for each £1 invested. The project resulted in improvements to transport accessibility, safety, and the environmental impact of travel. The project also improved the image of public transport and increased the demand for public transport services, with patronage growing by 48 per cent over the first two years of service. Passenger satisfaction has gone up by more than 20 per cent on average and the project achieved a monthly reliability between 85-99 per cent.



Photo by Spsmiller on wikimedia

50 per cent. Congestion levels for all traffic fell by 75 per cent. In Luton, a bus gateway that prioritised buses over other traffic was developed by the council with the local bus operator. Since its construction in 2014, passenger numbers on that route have tripled from around one to three million bus users a year. Bus services can also be helped by other transport policies, notably introducing controls on parking spaces and also charging for on- and off-street parking. In some places traffic wardens are employed specifically to enforce bus lanes and to stop parking in bus stops.⁵

Case study: North Somerset and kickstarter funding for buses



New buses arriving on the Portishead to Bristol corridor in 2014



Promotional activity with customers

With local authority budgets reducing in recent years, North Somerset Council had to find new ways to fund local bus services. Funding secured through the Local Sustainable Transport Fund (LSTF) provided the ideal opportunity to test kick-start funding to improve bus services on two key commuter routes.

The council undertook an innovative procurement process. Following market engagement, it declared the amount of funding available and invited operators to submit proposals on how they would use the funding to deliver improvements. A strong emphasis was on quality and long-term commercial viability.

The first of the two key commuter routes was between Weston-super-Mare and Bristol, with £150,000 of kick-start funding available. Operators were invited to submit proposals and First were awarded the investment. First provided the following:

- Increased frequency from 30 to every 20 minutes
- Newer vehicles
- Enhanced quality including leather seats, greater leg room, and Wi-Fi
- New 'Express Yourself' 'X' branding and supporting marketing materials

- Comprehensive publicity campaign
- Full commercial adoption of services following investment.

The enhanced service began operation in April 2012 and delivered 52 per cent growth in patronage by May 2014. Growth of services on this route led First to make further investment, with brand new vehicles introduced onto the route in 2013. The route is now operated entirely commercially thanks to the growth in patronage, replacing the need for any local authority top-up funding.

A year later, a second kick-start project was undertaken on the route between Portishead and Bristol. A further £150,000 funding, made available through LSTF, was awarded to First to provide the following enhancements:

- New simplified routes and numbering
- Increased frequency from three journeys per hour to a clock-face 15 minute frequency
- Adoption of tendered service to commercial operation
- Newer vehicles
- Enhanced quality including leather seats and Wi-Fi
- Further roll out of new 'X' brand
- Enhanced marketing/promotions campaign.

The route began operation in March 2013 and by May 2014, the route had delivered 17.3 per cent growth in patronage. Similar to the success of the Weston-super-Mare to Bristol route, the growth of these services led First to make further commitments on this route, with brand new vehicles arriving in summer 2014.

Following the success of these projects, the Council now uses kick-start investment projects alongside a traditional contract approach for more marginal services. As well as using funding from projects, such as LSTF, the Council has also used section 106 funding from developers to improve local bus services using the kick-start approach.

Kick-start investment is a way of securing public transport services that are sustainable in the long term, by giving the market the opportunity to determine what can be achieved with a set amount of funding, rather than tendering a route and hoping the price is affordable. Kick-start funding is also a way to boost services that are close to commercial viability so that local buses are not reliant on public funding year after year.

Partnership working was vital for these projects and relied on local authority and operator staff working together, particularly on some of the joint publicity and marketing activities.

New sources of funding for buses: workplace parking levy

It is possible for local authorities to raise funding specifically for transport. The congestion charge in London is an example of this and powers to introduce such charges are available to other local authorities. The legislation (the Transport Act 2000) also gives local authorities the power to introduce a Workplace Parking Levy (WPL), charging employers a fee for every car space they offer to their employees. The fee could vary depending on different kinds of vehicle (for example, lower fees for electric vehicles) or depending on time of day. Revenue raised from the levy has to be put into local transport. The only authority so far to

implement a levy is Nottingham City Council, which charges around £300 per space, per year for employers with more than ten spaces. This currently raises around £9 million a year, which has been used to pay for two new tram lines and new 'link' bus services for places not served by commercial bus routes.

The levy also incentivises people to travel to work by public transport, car sharing, cycling or walking and puts pressure on employers to make it easier for their employees to do so.⁶

Getting buses into new developments

New housing and developments can be bus-friendly, or can be designed in ways that prevent buses serving them well, or in some cases at all. Guidelines on practical ways of designing new developments for buses and case studies have been published recently.⁷ It is as yet unclear how the Bus Services Act can be used to ensure new developments get good bus services, but partnerships and franchises could in principle both be used to support such services. The aim should be to give certainty to developers and those in new developments that there will be high quality affordable services in place for when the first houses are inhabited. This will build in positive transport habits from day one while guaranteeing revenue for operators until housing occupancy rises to sustain the service commercially.

Partnerships and franchising to grow bus use

Enhanced partnerships in the legislation can be used to grow bus networks and bus use. The partnerships allow for action by local authorities to give buses priority and change wider transport policy, for example through car parking policy, and operators should for their part improve services, and invest in new vehicles. As subsequent sections show, partnerships can also expand bus use; they can be used to market bus services, improve bus infrastructure and make fares and ticketing simpler and more affordable. Franchising has been used in London and Jersey to increase funding (public and private) and support for buses. It has also grown bus use in those places.

Case study: Chelmsford and integrating bus routes with housing

First Essex introduced a new bus route in the City of Chelmsford, funded from Section 106 contributions.

Route 57 serves the new Beaulieu development on the northern fringe of the city. It is a luxurious and heavily marketed service. There is a 20-minute service from 0500 to 2300 Mondays to Fridays, half-hourly on Saturdays and hourly from 0700 to 1900 on Sundays, using brand new buses in a special livery. The back of each bus advertises 'Beaulieu to London in an hour' by connecting at Chelmsford railway station. The development hosts a high-quality bus shelter at the current terminus on the fringe of Beaulieu; there are others built amongst the new housing with notices explaining they will be brought into use as construction continues and the new service is extended further into the development.

The developer has agreed to fund new residents a free travel pass for a year for up to four people a household, a valuable benefit to families. The marketing publicity is of a very high standard and readily available. The service is well used, with the aim of ensuring that residents of the Beaulieu development do not really need a car. High quality buses running at a generous frequency and over a long day, coupled with superb marketing with a clear incentive to use the bus seem to be producing positive results.



Case study: Bus partnership in York

There has been a long-term bus partnership between City of York Council and the bus operators. It includes a lot of work on traffic signals, particularly making changes to their timings and phasing to improve the reliability of the bus service. There are two members of staff in the Council's traffic office who can see where all the buses are, so that they can tackle vehicles bunching up on routes, as well as the state of the traffic signals across the city. This allows the Council to:

- Change signals to speed up bus services which are suffering from congestion
- Get any broken signals fixed quickly – reducing the amount of congestion caused by broken signals
- Be in regular contact with the bus operators to tell them of any issues on the network (e.g. accidents, utilities works) which they might need to react to
- Direct two on-street staff (bus wardens) to deal with any incidents (e.g. broken down vehicles) which might be causing congestion. These members of staff also enforce parking and loading restrictions on the network.

The council also concentrates on maintaining other aspects of the highways network which can cause congestion, for example regularly repainting yellow box junctions, bus stop clearways, replacing broken signs etc.

Service punctuality has improved in response to these interventions. It has particularly improved where the Council has tackled whole corridors – fixing signals, pinch points, road markings etc.

The council has put a lot of effort into bus information. It has real time screens at every stop in the city centre, and many in the suburbs. It has also taken production of roadside timetables over from the operators, with a resulting big improvement in quality of information. More recently it has enhanced the information put out about disrupted services so that it's easier for passengers to know what is going on and any impacts on them.

All of the above works have been funded through a Better Bus Area partnership with the bus operators. The bus operators, through this, forego around £200,000 of Bus Service Operator Grant (BSOG) from the Government, which is instead passed to the council to fund the shared services set out above.

An additional £150,000 a year of operator BSOG is used to fund interventions on the road network to reduce congestion, principally improvements to traffic signals and small scale changes to road alignments to remove pinch points.

Using other funding pots, including a Better Bus Area grant from the Government in 2012, the council has also:

- Introduced a smartcard for bus passengers in York
- Overhauled the stops and shelters in York over the last four years, rebuilding several of the stop clusters in the city centre
- Installed camera enforcement of a stretch of bus-only route in the city centre
- Undertaken a big marketing exercise between 2012 and 2015.

The principal operator in York has also made some changes which have improved the quality of their services, particularly reducing many fares by around 25 per cent from August 2013. It also installed a local management team, which substantially improved management focus on the York operation.

As a result of these initiatives, York has seen an increase in passenger numbers of 12 per cent since 2012/13, against a regional decline of about five per cent. Bus passenger numbers in York were already high having doubled in the 2000-2005 period, and the city now has the 11th highest bus passenger trip rate (per capita head) of all of England's local transport authorities.

Further plans in York include:

- Introducing a passenger charter and publishing a monthly punctuality figure
- Reopening two large bus interchanges in the city centre which have been rebuilt
- Working with Network Rail and Virgin Trains East Coast on a plan to redevelop the area around York Rail Station. This will include a substantial improvement to bus stops/shelters/layover facilities and turning facilities for buses over the next two to three years.

Case study:
Merseytravel youth fare

In conjunction with bus operators, Merseytravel introduced 'Myticket', a £2.20 flat fare for all day bus travel for young people from five to 18.¹¹

The number of journeys made by young people has risen by 142 per cent in the three years following its introduction; and (whilst there are of course other factors at play) school attendance rates in the region have also improved.

As well as the level of fares, the availability and price of tickets that can be used on all bus operators is an issue. One of the perennial frustrations among bus passengers is that the return, day saver or

season ticket they buy from one bus company is not valid with other bus companies. This can mean having to wait longer to get on your way, when a bus going on the right route but from a different company will not accept your ticket.

To address this, a number of areas have implemented multi-operator ticketing schemes, either through paper tickets or alternatively with smartcards, mobile ticketing through passengers' phones (m-ticketing), or contactless payment via a bank card. Some of these are multi-modal, incorporating rail services and trams. The Bus Services Act enlarges the opportunities to develop such schemes.

More affordable buses

Bus fares have risen over the last few years, with the average bus fare up by 45 per cent in real terms between 1995 and 2016. Some of the hardest hit have been 16-18 year olds. This age group is one of the biggest users of bus services, often depending on buses to get to school or college. However, since the Government made it mandatory to be in full time education or training for this age group, 16-18 year olds often find that they are required to pay adult fares without receiving an adult wage. Job seekers are another group who often struggle to get to potential employment, or to job centres, because of high bus fares. Sixty-four per cent of job seekers have no access to a car or cannot drive.

In some places operators have reduced their fares. In Bristol, the main bus operator First Group cut their fares in 2013 following public feedback and some campaigning. The city has seen increased bus use since then, and although cash fares have increased, the fares on smartcards and with bank cards have been held down. Similarly the main operator in the West Midlands cut bus fares in Dudley and other parts of the Black Country by up to a third. In both cases, the operators are part of wider bus partnerships and alliances with local authorities aimed at growing bus use, though the fares cuts are not a formal part of these arrangements.

Some operators also offer flexible tickets. Cardiff Bus offers 'occasional travel' single journey tickets in bundles of 3 or 10; these can be bought using the operator's 'iff app' and stored until needed. The three journey 'easy three' day tickets save around 10 per cent on buying them individually. On the Isle of Wight, the main operator Southern Vectis also offers multi-day tickets, available in five, 15 and 30 day bundles giving unlimited travel across the network. Days do not have to be used consecutively and are valid for two years from purchase.⁸

In addition, local authorities can reach an agreement with bus operators to offer a particular group in their area (for example, students or job seekers) a concessionary fare without tying it to a partnership scheme or franchise. Transport for Greater Manchester offers free travel for jobseekers and new employees for their first month, and Reading Buses offers discount fares for jobseekers.⁹ Kent County Council offers free travel for 16-19 year olds in full time education or training, though there is an upfront charge.¹⁰

Cheaper and smarter bus fares

The Bus Services Act gives a number of options to reduce or limit bus fares:

- A multi-operator ticketing scheme: the Act enables multi-operator tickets, including on smartcards, mobile phones or bank card
- An advanced quality partnership can place a requirement on bus operators not to exceed a maximum fare for a particular route
- An enhanced quality partnership can include a requirement on all bus operators to charge a set price for a multi-operator or multi-modal ticket
- Under bus franchising, all fares can be set by the local authority.

The table below sets out clearly what options are available.

Smart ticketing speeds up bus use significantly, freeing up drivers from the task of having to fuss over fares and change. This means that even passengers who still use cash benefit from faster boarding times.

The act includes specific powers to set up multi-operator schemes with smart ticketing. In addition, advanced quality partnerships, enhanced partnerships and franchising all enable local authorities to require that operators accept people paying for their journeys with smartcards, contactless or mobile ticketing and sell all their ticketing products using one or more of these formats.

There is increasing evidence that simplifying fares encourages bus use by reducing uncertainty and anxiety for passengers. Bus operators and local authorities may wish to consider introducing a simple zonal structure, or a set fare across all journeys. A requirement on all operators to set their fares with reference to the same zonal structure can be implemented through franchising or an enhanced partnership scheme, though not through an advanced quality partnership.

The Bus Services Act also makes provision for local authorities to make ticketing schemes across local authority boundaries, so that ticketing schemes could encompass neighbouring local authorities.

Can a requirement be put on bus operators to:	Multi-modal ticketing scheme	Advanced Quality Partnership	Enhanced Partnership	Franchising
Sell and accept a multi-operator or multi-modal ticket (including a specific format, such as a smart card)?	✓	✓	✓	✓
Market particular tickets in a certain way (including promoting multi-operator tickets not just their own tickets)?	✗	✓	✓	✓
Set all their tickets and fares on a standard set of 'zones' that apply to all operators?	✗	✗	✓	✓
Follow common ticket rules for their own tickets (such as a standard length of 'period' tickets or age to qualify for a youth concession if offered)?	✗	✗	✓	✓
Sell or accept any type of ticket on a particular technology (such as a smart card)?	✗	✓	✓	✓
Charge no more than a maximum fare on a route?	✗	✓	✗	✓
Charge a set price for a multi-operator or multi-modal ticket?	✗	✗	✓	✓
Charge a set price for their own, single-operator ticket?	✗	✗	✗	✓

Case study: Devon and multi-operator ticketing

The Devon Day Rover is a simple scheme. It is entirely voluntary, with all participating bus companies agreeing to sell and accept the ticket at a price agreed by consensus. The price is set slightly above Stagecoach's own exclusive Day Explorer ticket.

Crucially, revenue stays where it falls, thereby avoiding complex and expensive administration and allocation of revenue. All participating companies accept that there is an element of 'win some, lose some,' i.e. they sell tickets to some passengers who move on to travel with other companies (= revenue gain), and they carry some passengers who have bought their tickets from another company (= revenue loss). The formal agreement is no more than a thirteen-paragraph two-page document.

The scheme was introduced in response to public comment, particularly in areas where the network is operated by more than one company. Whilst Stagecoach operate much of the network, there are significant areas of population where passengers may need to use more than one company's services to make certain journeys.

Publicity is via the county council's own outlets, plus leaflets and posters through the bus companies. Companies are encouraged to promote the scheme but it remains voluntary.¹²

Case study: Multi-operator tickets in Hertfordshire

Hertfordshire County Council has, since 2000, had a quality partnership covering the whole county. This partnership, marketed as 'Intalink', now includes a range of multi-operator fares. There are 'Busnet' all-operator day and weekly tickets in many of the main towns; an all-county 'explorer' ticket for day or weekly travel; and a saver card for 11-18 year olds. There is also a specific multi-operator ticket for the London Colney-St Albans corridor. This partnership also covers information and marketing (see page 16).

Case study: West Midlands, West Yorkshire and multi modal smart ticketing (rail, tram, bus)

Transport for the West Midlands has developed the 'Swift' card, which allows multi-modal travel on local trains, trams and nearly all bus services.¹³ This now includes a wide range of products: adult and child season tickets, pay as you go smartcards and cheap multi-day flexible tickets.¹⁴ A similar scheme now exists in West Yorkshire.¹⁵



Photo by Brandon Jones

Better bus services

Better bus service information and branding

Getting information about bus services – times, routes and fares – is a bit of a postcode lottery. In some areas there is good information, up-to-date and widely available. Increasingly, there is real time information too. However, elsewhere it can be harder to find; sometimes bus stops are managed by the operator, sometimes by local authorities. Real time information – enabling people to react to disruptions – is also very patchy.

This is one area that the Bus Services Act sets out to change. It includes a requirement for bus companies to publish information on their operations, making data on services and fares publicly available. The intention is to promote open data, putting information in the public domain, so others will be able to make it accessible in user-friendly formats. This data should include real time information on service running as well as the timetabled services.

This provision should improve journey planning, helping people work out the best fare and route for their journey. However, it also presents opportunities for operators to manage their services better, and for communities and passengers to look at the performance of local services. It can also provide insight into where and when bus disruptions are most likely to occur, helping transport authorities better target interventions like bus priority measures.

Unlike most parts of the Bus Services Act where local authorities can opt to take up powers, the open data clauses are mandatory everywhere, though the details are still being worked out. Local authorities can open up timetable and/or performance data now if they wish, as some have already done. Once the data is published, there are also questions about how this information is made available in a user friendly format. Some local authorities may wish to take a lead on making information available through their website and at transport hubs like railway stations. Others will take a more hands off approach, leaving it to third parties to use the data to develop websites or apps.

However, it's important to note that aside from the Secretary of State and local transport authorities, the data will be restricted to those 'who provide or facilitate the provision of information about relevant local services', rather than directly to users. In practice, this means that most of the users of this data are likely to be app developers. It will be important that accurate information about bus services is available in a range of ways, not just through apps, there are still plenty of places where phone reception is unreliable, and many people don't use smartphones or don't feel safe using a phone in the street or on the bus. Devon County Council is one authority that so far has continued to produce area timetable books and to maintain roadside timetable displays: it believes that while developing a user friendly website and a web and app-based real time information system, these online or other electronic formats should not be used as an excuse for cutting support for traditional formats and outlets which people still value.

Case study: Norfolk Bus Electronic Schedule

Norfolk County Council employed five people to keep their county-wide timetables up to date, updating it several times a year. Several smaller operators still submitted their timetables on paper, so the data entry was arduous and susceptible to mistakes.

Since 2011, the council has developed a comprehensive data management system where operators can upload their schedule data, effectively bringing in open bus data in advance of the Bus Service Act requirement to do so. The system has paid for itself in under three years and has meant that service changes can be uploaded in hours rather than days.¹⁶

There are also opportunities to improve the marketing and branding of bus services. The new powers in the Act offer operators and local authorities the opportunity to market buses better, setting a unifying theme (for example, a colour scheme for bus livery or logo) across all bus vehicles. This also enables joint marketing, so a city or area bus brand could be marketed across posters; link into the design of bus stations and stops; and be reflected in bus ticketing.

Better audio-visual information on buses

Outside London, few buses currently have audible or visual information available. This means that passengers who are unfamiliar with the route or who are hard of hearing or visually impaired are at a loss to know when to get off the bus. Section 17 of the Bus Services Act gives powers to the Transport Secretary to make regulations requiring bus operators to make accessible information in audible and visible formats.

The Government scoping note on this regulation suggests that it is intended to bring this requirement into force for larger bus operators (who provide about 70 per cent of bus services in the UK) in 2019 and for smaller operators by 2023. Unlike most of the Bus Services Act which applies mostly to England, this regulation would apply to the whole of Great Britain.

Case study: Intalink, Hertfordshire

As already noted, Hertfordshire has had a bus partnership covering the whole county since 2000. This partnership, marketed as Intalink, pools funding from bus and train operators and from the district councils to provide high quality information. The information now encompasses stop-specific timetables, real time information linked to the council's traffic management system, and investment in transport hubs at many of the county's town centres and railway stations. Bus stop management and maintenance is also included (as well as the joint tickets mentioned above). The Intalink brand is used on all the bus stops and information points, and on many of the buses operated in the county.¹⁷

Case study: Dorset and improving bus stops

Dorset County Council has improved its management of bus stops by cataloguing and assessing them. It has also introduced a map with real time information at each bus stop.¹⁸

Case study: Liverpool Bus Alliance 'Better by Bus'

The Liverpool City Region Bus Alliance, which brings together the transport authority Merseytravel with the main bus operators in a voluntary bus partnership, includes a jointly funded marketing campaign. 'Better by Bus' aims to market bus services at different stages of people's lives – going to school, starting or changing work, moving house, and also leisure travel. It has local advertising and a Better by Bus club.¹⁹

Case study: Oxford Bus Company

Some operators have already brought in audio-visual information on their buses and found ways to pay for it. In 2015, Oxford Bus Company embarked on an experiment to self-fund audio-visual equipment. The aim was to install equipment on 11 buses with the aim of recouping the capital investment through 3rd party advertising within three years. The experiment has been a success. By 2017, two years on, the investment was 75 per cent paid off with no additional staffing required to achieve this.²⁰

Better bus vehicles

In general the quality of buses on the road has vastly improved in recent years. There are legal requirements for all local buses to be accessible (without steps and with boarding ramps for wheelchairs), and pollution controls through European emissions standards. However, not all vehicles meet the latest standards. It's now possible using the Bus Services Act powers to set some minimum standards for the buses on the roads and the training of the drivers in them. Enhanced quality partnerships can be used for this purpose, by agreeing investment in new vehicles and the standards to be met in those vehicles. Under bus franchising, an authority can specify in contracts the types and standards of vehicles to be used.

These provisions can help at least four objectives:

Modern buses

Many people – especially people who never use them – have an image of buses as old, rattling, dirty, polluting and uncomfortable. This is increasingly out of date, the latest buses now being introduced have comfortable seats, free Wi-Fi, USB charging points and good information, often electronic. They are also fully accessible, with spaces for buggies and wheelchairs. Bus partnerships have been used in many places already to get such vehicles introduced, though some operators have invested in high quality vehicles under their own initiative. Such vehicles can revolutionise the way people see bus travel.

Greener buses

Many of our cities are choked with air pollution, which speeds up climate change; worsens breathing problems; and causes 40,000 early deaths a year. Most of this pollution comes from cars, and buses play a major part in reducing air pollution by giving people alternatives to driving. But bus emissions – especially diesel buses with older engines – also contribute to dirty air. Partnerships and franchises can agree emissions standards for buses. This is not just about getting new buses, older buses can be retrofitted with the latest Euro VI engine technology so, whilst they still run on diesel, they are much cleaner, even cleaner in some cases than cars. Greener Journeys estimates that this costs about £13,000 per bus.²²

Alternatively, local authorities could specify the usage of electric buses. While these have limits on battery life, the technology is rapidly evolving, with costs coming down and range increasing. Hybrid buses, which can operate electrically in clean air zones and switch to diesel in intercity parts of their route, where air quality is less of an issue, are also an option. Hydrogen buses, whose only emission is water, are also operational on the streets of London and Aberdeen. Bio-methane buses, running on gas from waste, can also be a cleaner alternative, and currently run on the streets of Bristol. Some cities are already promoting moves to hybrid and electric buses under existing partnership agreements.

More accessible buses

Using buses can be hard if you are disabled. Some progress has been made on bus access: since 2017, all single and double decker buses have had to be wheelchair accessible, but the design and specification of some buses still isn't great for those with disabilities.

The Bus Services Act offers a new route for local authorities to set standards and enforce bus accessibility. Indeed, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (Section 149 of the Equality Act), as public bodies

Case study: Route 36

The Leeds-Harrogate-Ripon bus route has seen massive growth in use since 2003, when its operator invested in high quality vehicles with leather seats. Since then it has been upgraded several times and now has some of the most comfortable and well-equipped buses in the country.²¹



Photo by Alex Hornby

local authorities must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination against any person with a protected characteristic (e.g. age, disability) and to 'encourage those who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low'. Transport is essential for disabled and older people to participate in public life; and so in considering how they manage or guide bus services in their area, local authorities can carry out their Public Sector Equality Duty.

Local authorities can in partnerships or franchises set local standards for bus design, for example going beyond the statutory minimum on the size of the wheelchair bay, or putting hearing loops on all buses so that hearing aid users can communicate with drivers and hear announcements. As already noted, the Act also includes general requirements for audible and visual information. Under enhanced partnerships, local authorities can take over the registration of bus services from the traffic commissioner, and could make accessibility criteria a condition of bus registration in their area. Local authorities who opt to franchise one or more bus routes in their area can set accessibility standards as part of the conditions for bidding for a route or route area.

The experience that disabled and elderly people have of bus services is strongly influenced by the driver. Most drivers are helpful and considerate in the way that they operate their bus which makes older and disabled people feel safe and comfortable when using buses. However, sometimes they don't always get it right. Frequent complaints include not having enough time to sit down before the bus pulls away, or finding it difficult to step into the bus because the driver omitted to 'kneel' the bus or to pull close into the kerb. Worse, a small minority of bus drivers actively discriminate against disabled people, for example by failing to enforce wheelchair users' priority in the wheelchair bay, or by challenging bus pass holders with an invisible impairment. The impact on disabled people's employment and life opportunities can be significant.

This is getting better with many bus operators now offering some form of disability equality training; and this is likely to become mandatory across the UK, through European law. However, in advance of this, partnership schemes or franchising schemes can include an obligation on operators to provide disability equality training to all bus drivers. Brighton and Hove runs a scheme where people with hidden disabilities can apply for a special pass which they show to the driver, this is called the Helping Hand Scheme.²³

Safer buses

Buses are in general a very safe way to travel, and are much safer than cars or lorries. However, they are still involved in fatal and serious crashes; in 2015, 64 people were killed and 638 people seriously injured in collisions involving buses. Bus operators have a duty to record these incidents internally, through the Health and Safety at Work Act. However, there is no duty to share the details of such incidents, and so for over half of these, no details are known in terms of the operator involved; whether the victim was a pedestrian, cyclist, motorist or bus passenger; and what happened. Enabling the publishing and analysis of trends in bus collisions allows operators and local authorities to work together to tackle any risks and make bus travel safer.

Confidential Safety Reporting schemes have been established in goods vehicles and other work related driving, and can be applied to bus operations too, giving staff a way to report safety concerns anonymously so issues can be addressed before any incident happens. This form of reporting is routine in the rail, maritime and airline industries. Since 2016 Transport for London (TfL) has extended the rail industry's Confidential Incident Reporting and Analysis System (CIRAS) to all its contracted bus operators (many of which are already CIRAS subscribers for their UK rail operations) under TfL's own subscription. This could be extended to bus operators elsewhere. Some are now doing this voluntarily, but to ensure full coverage local authorities can make subscribing to CIRAS and/or publishing incident data a requirement in a partnership scheme, a condition of registration in enhanced partnership schemes where the authority takes on service registration and it can also be made a condition of a franchise agreement, as has happened in London.

Better transport networks

People don't start and finish their journeys at a bus stop, they need buses to be part of door to door journeys, with the ability to link easily to a wider bus network and other modes of transport. London is of course well known for having a long tradition of integrated public transport, and other cities have invested in bus stations and interchanges. However, integrated networks can also be developed in (and arguably are as important for) more rural areas.

Bus partnerships and alliances have already been used to improve the quality and level of bus services across whole networks. Hertfordshire's Intalink partnership (see case study on page 16) has seen a county council develop bus/rail interchanges. Cornwall is showing that this can be applicable in remote rural areas too, by developing an integrated network for the whole county, encompassing bus and local rail services.

Case study: Bus alliances and partnerships

There are a number of comprehensive bus partnerships covering whole areas. Some have been mentioned already. There are two bus alliances in the West Midlands and Liverpool city regions, both of which are intended to provide comprehensive improvements to bus services. The West Midlands one was launched in 2012 and has been rolled out to other districts in the area.²⁴

The Liverpool City Region Bus Alliance has, since its inception in 2015, seen increased bus patronage and improvements across the network. The alliance agreement includes a commitment from operators to provide modern bus fleets with an average age of no more than seven years, and to be partners on a range of initiatives, including marketing campaigns, on-bus cleaning and customer service training. The alliance also includes network reviews, with a detailed two-stage public consultation process in each city region district to agree changes to the bus network in each area.²⁵

Case study: One public transport system for Cornwall

Cornwall Council is bringing together public transport in the county by creating a single public transport network. More frequent train services on the Cornwall main railway line between Penzance and Plymouth, due to start in December 2018, are being used as a catalyst for an integrated bus-rail timetable, and also an integrated ticketing scheme for residents and visitors. This has partly been enabled by the County's devolution deal with the Government, but also by funding from a very wide range of sources. The bus operators, including First Kernow, have invested in new vehicles and technology; the Local Enterprise Partnership has funded the installation of contactless ticketing technology on the buses run by smaller operators, ensuring comprehensive coverage, and bus-rail interchanges have been created at some of the main railway stations. Cornwall is showing that even rural areas can create integrated public transport networks, and in particular the idea of using railway stations as hubs for rural transport networks has wider application.²⁶

Their network is based on transport hubs, using rail stations or town centres as the basis for public transport services, with integrated timetables and smartcards encompassing bus and rail. This model could be applied in many other rural areas.

Conclusion

This guide has shown that it is possible to improve bus services and link them to wider improvements in transport, local economic development and the environment. The Bus Services Act includes new powers that can be used to make these improvements – we hope that communities around the country will take advantage of these powers and the ideas in this guide, and give buses the attention and support they deserve. For more information on improving and saving bus services, contact info@bettertransport.org.uk

Annex I: Bus partnerships

Quality bus partnerships have been around for some years in various forms, and many of the case studies in this guide have come from partnerships. There are voluntary partnerships – subject to loose agreements – and statutory partnerships or Quality Partnerships Schemes, which are legally recognised. Both voluntary partnerships and quality partnership schemes pre-existed the Bus Services Act, but continue to be options for local authorities wishing to improve bus services for their residents.

Under the Bus Services Act, previous partnership schemes become 'Advanced Quality Partnerships'; there is a new category of 'enhanced partnerships', which go further than the partnerships currently existing and allow for a wider range of measures to be included. By agreement, local authorities within enhanced partnerships can take on service registration functions from the traffic commissioners.

Both enhanced partnerships and advanced quality partnerships are open to all local transport authorities, including Mayoral and non-mayoral combined authorities; county councils; city councils and unitary authorities. The Act also makes provision for more than one local authority to join up and develop an enhanced partnership, or an advanced quality partnership, across their joint areas.

To implement an enhanced partnership, authorities need to invite operators to join. In consultation with the operators, authorities then prepare a "enhanced partnership plan" which tells the story about the scheme and sets a context with its bus improvement objectives, and also a detailed "enhanced partnership scheme" with the registration objectives (frequency, timetables, vehicles, ticketing etc), which are then used as a basis for registering bus services in the partnership area. Authorities consult on the plan and scheme with passengers and also with bodies such as the Competition and Markets Authority, and can proceed providing most bus operators agree.

For more details on advanced and enhanced partnerships, see the guidance from the Department for Transport on the Bus Services Act.²⁷

Case study: Birmingham City Centre Advanced Quality Partnership Scheme (AQPS)

Introduced in July 2012, the AQPS is the biggest of its kind in the UK. This covers multi-million pound investment in bus shelters, way-finding and bus lane enforcement in the city centre and requires all bus operators who enter the city centre to improve their quality standards, including exhaust emissions. Through the Bus Alliance, similar schemes are now being developed in other areas of the region.

Until 27th June 2017 the AQPS schemes were known as Statutory Quality Partnership Schemes (SQPS) but as part of the new powers under the Bus Services Act the name of such schemes have automatically changed to Advanced Quality Partnership Schemes. In terms of Birmingham City Centre there is no material change in the requirements of the scheme, only the name has been updated.

Quality partnerships can be enforced through traffic commissioners if operators are not meeting standards, or if they are using the facilities like bus lanes but are not a signatory to the partnership. Penalties include a fine, an order to invest in local services, to compensate passengers or changing registration to stop them operating certain services all together. Facilities can include bus stop poles, shelters, raised kerbs and bus stop clearways.²⁸

Annex II: Bus franchising

Franchising allows a local authority to set out the specifications for a particular bus route or routes, or alternatively for a bus network, and invite different companies to bid competitively to operate the route(s). Bus companies therefore compete not on the road for passengers, but through a tendering process. The Bus Services Act allows for local authorities to franchise their entire network, or to franchise small sections of it (corridor franchising).

There are many different models of bus franchising. Many people associate bus franchising with London, which has franchised its buses since 1986 when buses elsewhere in the country were deregulated. London's franchises are tightly specified, with TfL setting everything from routes and timetables to fares, vehicle specifications and driver training. TfL takes on all the revenue risk i.e. keeping all the revenue when a route is profitable and taking the hit when passenger numbers fall. This allows it to cross-subsidise unprofitable, but socially valuable routes (or sections of routes) with profitable routes.

However, the TfL model is only one way of doing bus franchising. London is, of course, highly idiosyncratic in many respects: it has high population density and the Congestion Charge and TfL has a high financial turnover with many employees. It's therefore important to appreciate that there are many different ways of operating a bus franchise, but franchising is a model that can work in different contexts, not just in the city.

For example, a local authority might wish to franchise a small section of its bus network, perhaps only one important route. Or in areas struggling to maintain unprofitable routes which are nevertheless socially necessary, a local authority might create a franchise bundle, inviting tenders for exclusive rights to a highly profitable route, on the condition that the winning bidder also took on the socially necessary routes.

Case study: Jersey

The Government in Jersey already has had bus franchising powers since 2002. In 2013 it revised this and let a new franchise contract which was won by Libertybus, a subsidiary of HCT Group. In this franchise, revenue risk lies with the operators, who design the network themselves within broad parameters and objectives. Although the Government set out its specification, non-compliant bids were actively encouraged. Since the new contract began, passenger numbers are up by a third, five new routes have been added, frequencies have improved, passenger satisfaction is up by five per cent and subsidy levels are down by £800,000. The Government and the operator put this down to the way the contract incentivises the operator to grow passenger numbers.²⁹

So, for example, the tender might link together a heavily used central town route together with a handful of feeder routes connecting outlying villages or suburbs to the centre of town. Some franchising arrangements leave the financial risk largely with the operator, thereby reducing the financial exposure of the local authority.

Under the Act, only places with mayors and combined authorities can franchise bus services without needing agreement by the Government. These mayoral areas with bus franchising powers are: Greater Manchester, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the West Midlands, the West of England, the Liverpool City Region, and the Tees Valley.

Cornwall is not a combined authority and does not have a mayor, but also has bus franchising powers.

In order to exercise franchising powers, a combined authority must demonstrate that it has:

- Compared a franchising proposal to 'one or more other courses of action'
- Consulted with bus operators, bus users, the traffic commissioner, Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), and local police
- Assessed the proposal following a 'consideration' of a business case covering strategic fit, value for money, feasibility, affordability, and deliverability
- Obtained an independent audit of the quality of its assessment (information and analysis) and compliance with guidance.

A number of the mayoral combined authorities are considering franchising and are at present working on these requirements.

Franchising powers are available to other authorities but only by permission from the Transport Secretary. These powers have not yet been tested, though there have been active discussions within some authorities about applying for franchising powers.



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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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