



Community Bus Partnerships

A proposition to deliver improved local bus services





Overview

Following the election of the Labour government, the roll out of Manchester's integrated Bee Network and the introduction of the Buses Services Bill in Parliament at the end of 2024, there's a renewed focus on the role of franchising to improve local bus services in England. In December 2024 the DfT also confirmed that it is undertaking a review into Enhanced Partnerships 'with a view to strengthen collaboration and delivery'. The aim is to 'identify best practice in both the content and execution of EPs and lead to DfT setting new minimum expectations for future high-quality partnerships.'

Similarly, in Wales a Buses Bill is expected to be introduced to the Senedd in early 2025 with the Welsh government planning to roll out franchising on a regional basis from 2027. In Scotland, the recent Regional Bus Strategy proposed by Strathclyde Partnership for Transport recommends progressing with a region-wide franchising scheme that would cover both the urban centre of Glasgow, other urban and suburban centres, and rural districts, with the earliest implementation expected in 2028.

This focus on franchising has been brought into even sharper focus following England's mayoral elections in May 2024, with many of the successful mayors signposting their intention to introduce a franchised model into their Mayoral Combined Authorities, and some subsequently commencing the exploratory stages. It stems from a desire to improve local bus service delivery and - as we've heard frequently - to enable local policy-makers to 'take back control' of bus services. Improving the quality of local bus services (widely defined and often differing by region) is an objective shared by commercial bus operators and local authorities alike.

In identifying the best way forward, we believe the key question that all of those involved in bus service delivery should be asking is: how can bus services be most effectively improved in a way that benefits the passenger and the wider community (especially through continuous modal shift away from the private car)? The answer to this should inform the model that is introduced in each area.

It may be that franchising is suitable for some parts of the UK - certainly it appears more attractive to politicians in some areas of the country more than others. London has operated a franchise model since the mid-1980s, although it has some unique components (including a profitable underground service and a well-established congestion charging regime) that provides Transport for London with an element of financial flex in the way it designs and delivers its transport network. Manchester is now into its second year of franchising with the Bee Network.

Even with the government's intention to streamline the franchising process it's not a decision that can be taken lightly by local leaders. It involves significant cost, requires substantial expertise and entails a degree of financial risk. Against the current backdrop of the public finances, the severe squeeze on local spending capacity, and the zero-based approach taken by the Chancellor to the spending review - meaning every single line will be assessed on whether it represents value for money - it raises the question about how bus services can best be improved - giving local leaders greater and more meaningful control over bus services - at the same time as representing good value for taxpayers' money.

This paper sets out a proposal for an evolution of the Enhanced Partnership (EP) model - what we are calling a Community Bus Partnership - envisaged as the next stage of Enhanced Partnerships, involving even closer working relationships between bus operators and LTAs.

As the minister for local transport has said: there is no one-size-fits-all model to improve bus services. Just as there are many different types of franchising, there are different ways that Enhanced Partnerships can be delivered. This paper puts forward a version of Enhanced Partnerships that has not been fully realised yet in the UK, but which we believe should be given consideration by policy-makers as ministers and local leaders take decisions about the future of bus services that will last for a generation.





Executive Summary

Below we outline the key recommendations contained within this report:

Introducing Longer Consultation Periods: LTAs could implement longer notice and consultation periods for bus route changes, before operators register them with the Traffic Commissioner. A staggered system could be adopted, with longer notice periods required for more significant service withdrawals.

Commitment to a Service Baseline: Commercial bus operators could agree to a minimum baseline level of service with LTAs, to reassure local policy-makers. This could apply to the network as a whole or to specific routes, providing flexibility while maintaining service levels.

Traffic Light Scheme for At-Risk Routes: A traffic light system (red, amber, green) could be introduced to classify bus routes by risk, with routes at high risk (red) triggering early discussions between the operator and LTA, before the statutory 28 day period. Increased data-sharing between bus operators would support the process.

Adopting Moving Traffic Offences: More local authorities should take on powers to enforce moving traffic offences to help with bus lane contraventions. The benefits include reduced traffic congestion, improved traffic flow, and quicker journey times for public transport services. Funds raised from bus lane fines could be used to support local initiatives.

Bus Centre of Excellence: The Bus Centre of Excellence should host events across the country to gather a robust evidence base of best practices for Enhanced Partnerships.

Networking Opportunities: There should be greater priority and prominence given to networking events by the Bus Centre for Excellence, to disseminate best practice for delivering Enhanced Partnerships.





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About the Urban Mobility Partnership



The Urban Mobility Partnership (UMP) is a coalition committed to providing long-term leadership and near-term solutions to improve future mobility. The group was founded to ensure that effective policy at a national, regional, and local level, combined with new technology, supports better mobility and helps tackle the major challenges of congestion, air quality and decarbonisation.

UMP is committed to helping to develop mobility solutions which help towns and cities transform how consumers travel. The group draws upon its member's expertise from across the mobility sector and 'on the ground' knowledge to develop solutions which can be implemented within the short to medium term, rather than looking ahead to the next 25 years.



Enhanced Partnerships

A strong foundation to build on

Enhanced Partnerships are about bus operators and LTAs forming an alliance to improve services for people in their regions. But they are also about giving LTAs greater oversight of the delivery of bus services. As the Government's BSIP guidance (2021) says: 'The effect of all Enhanced Partnerships...is to impose a suite of restrictions, set out in the scheme, on the deregulated bus market in that scheme's geographical area to deliver BSIP outcomes.'

The Bus Services Act 2017 provided for two forms of statutory partnership between bus operators and local authorities: Advanced Quality Partnership Schemes (AQPS) and Enhanced Partnerships, as well as bus franchising. AQPS and Enhanced Partnerships, however, cannot coexist. The options were designed to give local authorities more collaborative and influential ways of partnering with bus operators than previous statutory partnership options (made available under the Transport Act 2000). Prior to 2021, some local authorities also entered into voluntary partnerships with bus operators.

Within local government, bus policy is a matter for LTAs (county councils, unitary councils, or combined authorities) whose role is broadly limited to providing infrastructure like bus stops and bus lanes, and providing finance e.g. reimbursing bus operators for concessionary fares and funding some supported services. Under an Enhanced Partnership LTAs and operators must agree a series of shared aims and actions to improve bus services in their area. This could include improvements such as better ticketing and pricing systems, more modern and varied payment methods, new and improved vehicles, better service scheduling, or route improvements. The authority will typically enter into the Enhanced Partnership with one or more incumbent operators in the area.

EP agreements must include an 'EP plan' - a high-level document outlining the overarching objectives and vision for bus services. The plan will typically include an analysis of the current local bus market and explain how the objectives will be achieved. In their simplest form LTAs can agree, for example, to fund bus lanes, parking restrictions or other facilities which improve bus services more. Operators in return agree, for example, agree to meet standards around time and frequency of services.

Enhanced Partnerships also include 'EP schemes', which supplement the plan by setting out the specific actions required to achieve the overall vision and objectives, such as operational requirements e.g. vehicle specifications, ticketing structures, as well as any actions required of the authority.

One of the big advantages of Enhanced Partnerships is their flexibility to vary in scope: they can cover an entire region or just a single street. For that reason they operate in parts of a region, whilst other parts of a region can adopt an alternative model. Because of their collaborative nature, they can only be progressed with the support of the majority of bus operators (those running 75% of local bus services), with legislation designed to allow operators to input at key milestones in their development.

Uptake of Enhanced Partnerships was initially very limited. By the end of 2020, Hertfordshire County Council was the only LTA to introduce an Enhanced Partnership. That changed with the introduction of the National Bus Strategy (March 2021) which outlined the government's vision for bus services in England, designed to increase bus journeys by returning bus ridership to pre-covid levels and then to exceed it. It required LTAs to adopt one of two options: either an Enhanced Partnership or franchising. Those which did not would forfeit Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) funding from the DfT. The government at the time said "there can simply be no return to the situation, seen in too many parts of England, where services were planned on a purely commercial basis with little or no engagement with, or support from, LTAs". This was a spur to widespread adoption. By 2024 every local authority in England had opted for an Enhanced Partnership, with the exception of Manchester which launched its franchised Bee Network in 2023.

So Enhanced Partnerships already represent a move towards greater local authority control, giving LTAs greater scope to influence and steer local bus operations.

As the 2017 legislation only applied to England - and transport is a devolved issue - both Scotland and Wales took a slightly different approach, although both effectively endorsed the Enhanced Partnership models under their own legislation and guidance. Wales calls them Enhanced Quality Partnerships and Scotland legislated for partnerships but effectively but calls them Bus Service Improvement Plans in their 2019 legislation.

Enhanced Partnerships have also been created against the backdrop of what has been an historically difficult period for the bus sector.

- **Covid:** In 2020/21, there was a steep decline in bus use because of Covid travel restrictions. Since then, bus use has been continually recovering, with local bus journeys in 2023/24 recovering to 90% of pre-pandemic levels.
- **National staff shortage:** Following the pandemic the bus sector experienced a dramatic national staff shortage. This impacted reliability, punctuality and hindered the delivery of BSIPs in the timeframes operators wanted. Staff turnover was also unprecedented: one local bus operator experienced staff turnover rise from 11% to 40% in the space of two months in 2021. In 2022 the recruitment challenges were continuing: in November of that year the Confederation of Passenger Transport found that almost 1 in 10 bus driver positions were still vacant across the UK.
- **Bus funding challenges:** The National Audit Office (2020) said Enhanced Partnership powers made little difference when balanced against the funding pressures that local government faced from 2010 onwards. Indeed, there have long been concerns that the amount of money that local authorities receive from central government does not match what they pay out to bus operators to reimburse them for accepting concessionary fares, meaning local authorities must make up any shortfall from other sources. In June 2023, the Local Government Association (LGA) said there was a £452m funding gap in the money councils receive from government compared with the actual number of English national concessionary travel scheme (ENCTS) journeys made in 2022. This meant that councils were having to plug the financial gap from their own already stretched budgets, which the LGA said was "completely unsustainable".
- **Servicing rural routes:** There has been a decrease of 45% in council-subsidised bus services between 2005 - 2024, especially in non-metropolitan areas (Post-covid, there has been a small increase). The Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT) says that councils are increasingly unable to subsidise bus routes. Declining budgets and competition with statutory priorities such as education and adult social care mean that funding has declined and 56% of lifeline services covering 180 million miles a year have been lost since 2009/10.
- **Lifestyle and behavioural changes:** The long-term decline in bus patronage is in part the result of the increase in private car ownership (supported by freezes and reductions in fuel duty since 2012 and the availability of low interest loans and low deposit finance deals), a rise in home-working and the growth of online shopping.



So this is the challenging context in which Enhanced Partnerships were first introduced. Just five years since their inception, the growing political appetite for franchising risks overlooking the potential for Enhanced Partnerships to evolve further into even closer working relationships between LTAs and operators.

Further, the original tranche of BSIP funding to grow bus patronage and improve bus Services - as part of Enhanced Partnerships - will only just have been spent by local authorities since it covers the period 2022 - 2025, and was only allocated to 31 of the 79 authorities who applied.

What's more, we are still in the financial year for the BSIP funding (so-called Phase 2) - given to authorities who were unsuccessful in their original BSIP bids - so the full benefits of this second round of funding will not yet be fully felt by bus passengers.

The Network North funding (later renamed BSIP Phase 3) and announced in the October '24 Budget will only now be making its way from Whitehall to the town hall. The point being that many of the key funding allocations designed to deliver the promise of Enhanced Partnerships will not yet be felt by passengers. So it would be premature to judge the success or otherwise of the model.

This is the starting point for our Community Bus Partnerships proposition. But before exploring what this means, it's important to understand what improvements Enhanced Partnerships can - and already are - delivering.





Enhanced Partnerships

Key Benefits

Every Enhanced Partnership is a bespoke plan designed to address and adapt to local need. The improvements that have been delivered from Enhanced Partnerships across the UK benefit customers, communities and the taxpayer, and include the following:

Taxpayer value:

- Moving to franchising comes with costs: the city of Manchester purchased depots, buses and manages the ongoing costs of bus delivery. It has been suggested that under franchising in Manchester, buses will cost £100 million a year more to run, with set-up and capital costs totalling c.£230 million. It would be incredibly helpful for Transport for Greater Manchester to make its franchise costings publicly available to allow a proper assessment and scrutiny of the costs and benefits of their model.
- Under an Enhanced Partnership, operators provide the majority of investment to deliver the benefits including investing in new clean vehicle fleets (supported by government grants).

Example: Maximising the use of fixed resources

- Exeter's Matford Bus Depot is a good example of a bus operator extracting maximum economic and environmental value from a fixed asset.
- Built at a cost of £5m, the bus parking area is used as a Park & Ride site during the day when the bus fleet is out.
- This will be developed further into an EV charging hub for community use by day and to charge the electric bus fleet by night.
- It provides an income to the council through rent, improved parking facilities for the city, reduced congestion and pollution and greater availability of rapid charging infrastructure at competitive prices for residents.

Fare simplification:

- Ensuring a seamless digital experience for passengers.
- Reducing the number of fare bands.
- Offering a simple suite of 'period' tickets e.g. daily, weekly and monthly.
- Offering carnet tickets.
- 'London-style' price-capped tickets.

Fare capping - better value fares:

- Fare capping enables passengers to take unlimited journeys, tapping with their contactless payment method, being appropriately charged to a maximum daily price or a maximum weekly price.
- Fare capping can also be expanded to different modes of public transport in addition to bus (tram, rail, metrolink etc).
- With the establishment of Shadow Great British Rail there's a chance now to explore tie-ins with rail.



Interoperability - efficient integrated journeys:

- A better integrated bus, tram and rail network: multi-operator ticketing (and fare capping, as above) is also possible - whereby systems interact and expedite use of tickets and capping across different operators and different transport modes.

Reliability:

- LTAs can align operator obligations to broader policy objectives such as improving service reliability.
- The Enhanced Partnership framework provides a mechanism to enforce progress by holding bus operators accountable, as well as committing LTAs to measures which, for example, reduce congestion to reduce bus journey times.

Unified network branding:

- Near unified branding can be achieved with bus (and other transport modes) livery changes, ensuring all operators and connected transport services adopt the same branding and look (typically bus operators retain advertising space on buses).

Seamless, easy-to-use services:

- One unified brand and customer contact point for all bus services, irrespective who the bus operator is - improving and simplifying the customer experience.
- Likewise a single local phone number can be used for all customer enquiries irrespective of which operator it is (Traveline already exists as a single national point for passenger enquiries).

Better data sharing:

- Good data sharing is key to a successful operator / local authority relationship - especially true when route viability becomes more challenging: e.g. working with policy-makers to share a full suite of KPI, performance and metrics reporting including monthly performance data for any routes that are not covering marginal costs and are at risk of revision.

Improved accessibility:

- Commitments around installing / retrofitting audible and visible information systems to comply with Public Service Vehicles Accessibility Regulations
- Some operators, for example Stagecoach in Portsmouth, have gone further - installing multi-model information on big screens inside buses, informing passengers about live train departure times as vehicles approach nearby railway stations.
- Operators are also exploring providing information about onward travel at bus stops - for example providing information about availability of e-scooters and e-bikes that may be available for hire nearby (important for last / first mile journey connectivity and safety late at night).

Environmental improvements:

- Partnerships can align with an LTA's Clean Air / Net Zero plans, with a set of KPIs against which operators can be held accountable.

Improved & simplified customer information:

- Clear journey planning and bus tracking information for customers.
- Branding unification (as above) can also happen online: bus operators can provide the digital and back-office infrastructure for a single shared region-wide application and website, enabling a single source of travel information across an area, accessible via a single platform.

Commercial transparency:

- Open data on operational and financial performance by bus operators and customer complaints.

Better skilled and rewarded employees:

- Investment in employee training and new apprenticeships, and commitments such as paying all staff the Real Living Wage.

Supporting jobseekers:

- Targeted fare discounts / free journeys to support local communities e.g. discounted / free tickets for jobseekers.

Supporting further Public-Private Partnerships

- Enhanced Partnerships allow bus operators to freely collaborate with other mobility providers, such as bike and scooter hire, car clubs, and car hire, among others. One example of collaboration between modes includes mobility hubs, often at key transport interchanges like bus stations, that provide seamless connections between modes and improve first/last mile journeys.
- Through Stagecoach's involvement in the Urban Mobility Partnership (UMP), UMP members bring extensive experience in designing and operating mobility hubs — in some cases, delivered at no cost to the local authority. EPs offer bus operators the flexibility to form innovative public-private or fully private partnerships that expand mobility choices and improve the overall user experience.

What's more - notwithstanding government plans to simplify the process for LTAs to move to franchising - the process of implementing an Enhanced Partnership is still much quicker and simpler than moving to the franchising model, improving bus services and benefiting local communities sooner. The Manchester franchising model took around six years to deliver from the Bus Services Act taking effect to the launch of the new Bee Network. An Enhanced Partnership by contrast typically takes around six months to one year to establish from inception to delivery, depending on the local authority.



There is a final - and crucially important issue - that warrants mention, but is rarely discussed by policy-makers who are pro-franchising: the split in powers between highways authorities and Local Transport Authorities in England and the challenges this can cause.

Enhanced Partnerships are agreements between LTAs and bus operators. But not all LTAs are also their region's highways authorities. It means that when an Enhanced Partnership is being established in areas where the LTA is not also the highways authority, it can be much more difficult for the LTA to make commitments to local bus operators about being able to deliver road improvements. This is a really important issue because from the bus operator perspective, a big challenge to delivering bus services on time is road blockages (road works, congestion, traffic contraventions in bus lanes etc). Without the powers to address these issues, it makes it much more difficult for LTAs to uphold their Enhanced Partnership commitments.

Some LTAs hold both powers: Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council are the region's highways authorities and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) is also the LTA. This means bus operators are dealing with a single entity when signing the Enhanced Partnership. However, in somewhere like Greater Manchester the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) is the LTA but the region's councils are the highways authorities. A vital point to note is that under franchising this doesn't change: so in the above example Andy Burnham has the power to adopt a franchised bus model but he has no more powers now than he did before franchising over the region's highways. Franchising is a legitimate bus delivery model but it's not a panacea and bus services delivered this way will face exactly the same challenges and frustrations that are currently faced by commercial operators.

Of course many Enhanced Partnerships will bring highways authorities into the room when developing the plan but that doesn't mean that desired outcomes will be delivered, since it's the LTA signing the plan not the highways authority. Changes in highways authority personnel, local authority elections and other factors can also make it more difficult to secure buy-in over time from a highways authority that is not technically a signatory to an Enhanced Partnership.





Case Study

Enhanced partnerships - success of the model in Leicester

In May 2022, seven bus operators entered into an Enhanced Bus Partnership Scheme with Leicester City Council to improve the local bus network.

The Partnership tasked the Council and its bus operators with achieving 100 distinct goals between 1st May 2022 - 31st March 2025, utilising combined investment from bus operators, the Council, and additional funding from the DfT to support the city's decarbonisation efforts.

In just over two years, the arrangement between Leicester City Council and the bus operators has achieved 94 of 100 commitments. Key achievements in 2024 include the deployment of 134 battery-electric buses, resulting in a city network that is now 50% zero-emission; a 25% increase in patronage on orbital services; and a free city centre service that carried 500,000 passengers in its first year. Additional successes of the partnership include improvements to priority and stop infrastructure, network optimisation, and the establishment of a unified brand.

In 2023 Leicester experienced a 26% increase in passenger growth, outperforming the rest of the Midlands by 18%, a success widely attributed to the partnership. The Leicester example is a showcase of what can be achieved through a strong partnership with the local council, particularly in supporting the city's efforts to reduce carbon emissions and enhance air quality for its residents.

We can see from the above list of benefits that Enhanced Partnerships can deliver many of the improvements that Mayors are looking for locally, without the cost and time associated with franchising.



Community Bus Partnerships

So Enhanced Partnerships have been introduced at arguably the most challenging time for bus services in a generation. Funding and behavior changes are impacting bus patronage in a way not seen before. Bus operators sometimes come in for criticism from policy-makers (on occasion of course that blame is justified) but the wider ecosystem in which buses operate is changing in a way that requires a new creative approach.

The big challenge faced by many bus operators is the slowing of journey times, which is often the result of factors outside their control (e.g. growing road congestion, especially in inner cities and a need for more bus priority measures), which in turn makes delivering bus services more costly and makes taking the bus for passengers less attractive.

Simply changing who runs and manages buses is not necessarily the solution. That rather assumes the entire system is being mismanaged. It isn't. It's just not always acting optimally, not always delivering as well as it could for local communities. The government said four years ago, bus services should not be planned purely on a commercial basis. There is a legitimate argument that LTAs merit greater control and oversight over bus services. But there's no reason that LTAs cannot take a greater, more direct involvement in the planning and delivery of bus services, without having to go as far as moving to a full franchising model.

Indeed, the idea of building on Enhanced Partnerships has been mooted before. Bus operators across West Yorkshire have previously set out a case for bus reform styled as 'Enhanced Partnership Plus', designed to deliver more public control of buses but with less financial risk to the public purse, bringing improvements to passengers' journeys quicker than franchising.

An independent poll conducted on behalf of The Best for West Yorkshire – the campaign run by bus operators in the region who called for this model – showed that two-thirds of people in West Yorkshire believed the financial risk of running the region's buses should remain with private bus operators and not transfer to taxpayers. Indeed, WYCA has estimated that it would need to spend at least £100m setting up the required administration, buying buses and depots from operators to prepare for a franchised system.

So what innovations distinguish the existing Enhanced Partnerships model from a Community Bus Partnerships proposition? The latter should be seen as a natural evolution of the former, using existing powers to give LTAs more control over services and bring operators into closer relationships with local leaders. Below we outline the key elements we believe give greater realisation to the Enhanced Partnership model.

1. Taking back (network) control

Following legislative changes that make franchising possible outside London, mayors and local leaders have in recent years talked increasingly about their desire to 'take back control' of deregulated bus operations.

Part of this desire for control centres around policy-makers wanting more influence over timetabling and co-ordination with other transport modes. The BSIP actually emphasises the need to minimise timetable changes and for these to be coordinated across operators, so they happen at the same time. Indeed, timetabling changes by commercial bus operators can already be restricted under an Enhanced Partnership, giving passengers more certainty around bus times. A scheme can, for example, specify that all bus services operating in a defined geographical area must restrict changes to just once or twice per annum.

Yet despite these powers, route, timetabling and frequency changes remain key concerns for local policy-makers and can cause frustration, even when warning of route changes are provided. Policy-makers sometimes feel like they do not have enough time to adjust to decisions to change or cease bus routes, allowing them little time to introduce supported services and communicate changes to local people. So what more could be done?

The following proposals seek to address some of these concerns and could be introduced independently of one another or in combination.

a. Introducing longer consultation periods

- Operators of commercial bus services must currently give 70 days' notice if they wish to change the routing or timetable of a service: bus operators must share route changes with the local authority who have 28 days to respond and there is a further statutory 42 day notice period once the Transport Commissioner has been informed.
- One way for LTAs to take on greater control over the bus network, would be by building in longer notice and consultation periods around any route changes before registering these with the Traffic Commissioner.
- There could be a staggered system whereby the more of a service that a bus operator plans to withdraw the longer the notice period required. Similarly, minor changes could require shorter notice periods. For example a 5% mileage reduction as a result of long-term driver recruitment problems would merit a much shorter notice period than a complete de-registration with the Traffic Commissioner, providing longer for the LTA and the operator to work together to find a solution.

b. Commitment to a service baseline

- Commercial bus operators could agree minimum baseline operations with local authorities - as part of an Enhanced Partnership - to reassure local policy-makers about the level of service provision locally.
- For example, if a current bus operator's mileage today is taken as the baseline (100%), an operator could commit to services never falling below say 90% during control period times for the duration of the Enhanced Partnership. That could provide reassurance to a local authority that if route patronage does drop that operators will not exit a route entirely, maintaining some service provision for passengers (especially relevant on rural routes).
- Bus operators could agree both a minimum threshold for the network as a whole in a given region, as well as specific ones on each route. This might mean that for example on local market days when demand is higher there are more bus services, but there are reduced services on other days. The point is that an agreement like this offers some flexibility to bus operators whilst reassuring local authorities about service-levels over the medium-term.

c. Traffic light scheme for at-risk routes

- The introduction of a red, amber and green status for bus routes should also be considered. Routes classified as red (where significant route changes are at risk) would be discussed with the local authority well in advance (before the statutory 28 day period). With regular liaison meetings the local authority would ideally be on top of these most 'at risk' services as well as those identified as amber (at risk in the longer-term), that may in time become less commercially viable.
- Most route decline is gradual, so by undertaking talks about specific routes well in advance, local decision-makers can explore alternative funding support or changes to routes (e.g. supplementing parts of routes with demand responsive transport in rural areas).
- Potential solutions could then be properly explored supported by a transparent offering of data to local authorities to quantify the bus operator's issues. Data-sharing could potentially be dependent on route risk: more data and more regular sharing of data would be merited between the bus operator and the LTA on red routes with minimum data sharing on fully commercially viable routes.

This should make it easier for the LTA and bus operators to plan routes, making it more likely that a solution is found before a route change becomes public, and which in turn avoids the situation where councillors are forced into difficult and last-minute decisions which often prove unpopular with local people.

2. Governance: strong local leadership & making the most of existing powers

A robust governance framework can provide operator performance accountability that is comparable to a franchise performance regime, and gives local leaders including Mayors a direct role in governance. A Partnership Board is ultimately responsible for Enhanced Partnership decision-making. Many local mayors and council leaders who want to take more control over regional bus operations already chair their Board as a way to take a direct leadership role in the operation of their local Partnership.

It's also possible to design a Partnership system which includes key quality metrics, such as reliability, journey times and vehicle requirements with stated measures and tolerances, underperformance against which incurs a significant penalty for bus operators. Indeed, under existing rules local authorities can refer bus operators to the Traffic Commissioner for breaches of Enhanced Partnerships, who can then investigate offences and levy sanctions including fines on those operators. The size of the fine is based on the number of vehicles a bus operator is licensed to use. The Commissioner's powers in extreme circumstances extend to stopping bus operators from running a single service - or even running any services at all. Penalties which cost bus operators over £100,000 for an operational breach have been levied by the Transport Commissioner in the past. The point is that it is possible to hold operators to account where LTAs are willing to refer cases to DVSA and the Transport Commissioner.

d. Taking on moving traffic offences

- One responsibility that more local authorities could take on are powers to enforce moving traffic offences, which give local decision-makers more enforcement control of bus lane contraventions.
- Since May 2022, local authorities in England outside of London have been able to apply to the Secretary of State for these powers. Local authorities must follow certain steps when they apply for designation. To-date 73 local authorities have been granted these powers. In correspondence with DfT they are unable to confirm how many more local authorities have not taken on these powers, who could do so.
- The benefits for local authorities of adopting these powers include reduced traffic congestion, improved traffic flow, improved road safety, quicker journey times for public transport services and reduced vehicle emissions with positive knock-on effects on air quality. Longer-term it makes moving traffic enforcement more effective and reduces the number of repeat offences.
- What's more, a local authority's bus lane fines can be used to support good local initiatives. In Hull, a proportion of funds raised through bus lane fines are already used to subsidise local youth fares.

3. Greater government support for Enhanced Partnerships

In conjunction with more effective use of the powers that Enhanced Partnerships give to LTAs, government support for the model and for buses more widely would help to further improve bus services.

The DfT and the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT) launched the Bus Centre of Excellence in March 2023 with £815,000 of government funding. As the website says, it is 'A place of resources, guidance and support for all those working within and around the bus sector. Whether following the franchising or the enhanced partnership model for improving local bus services, all places in the country need the right skills and capability to deliver attractive bus services as part of a net zero transport system.'

However, at the time of first writing there were no upcoming educational events listed on the Bus Centre of Excellence website (20.01.25). Similarly, the Centre hosts three networks designed to share knowledge, information and best-practise between peers. One of these is the Public Sector Member's Network, which it says meets every two months. However (on 20.01.25), it lists the 'next meeting will be on 19th November'.

The Bus Centre of Excellence did however facilitate the 2024 South East Enhanced Partnerships Chair event, which made a series of recommendations about how central government could accelerate bus improvements, by supporting Enhanced Partnerships, recommending the following:

Long-term and Stable Funding

- Provide funding certainty (5 years+) to enable better, more stable network planning and scheme development, and to facilitate staff development and retention.
- Remove competition between LTAs for funding.
- Make funding more integrated and flexible to allow for the prioritisation and delivery of schemes in line with local strategic plans and other modes.

Greater Support for Rural Areas

- Greater consideration to the rural context when allocating funding / setting requirements.
- Ensure an appropriate model for delivering bus services in rural areas, including Community Transport (CT) and Demand Responsive Transport (DRT).

Regulatory and Policy Reforms

- Integrate public transport into land-use planning policies, education, and other public services such as the NHS.
- Simplify the EP process to reduce the level of resource required to prepare the EP Plan, particularly alongside the preparation of the BSIP.
- Identify opportunities to improve the management of roadworks, and resultant congestion, and parking behaviors that impact on bus efficiency.
- Coordinate cross-departmentally to align policy so that buses can serve essential destinations effectively, e.g., working with the Department for Education to consider adjusting school hours to ensure buses can serve schools effectively.

Capacity Building and Knowledge Sharing

- Set minimum data standards and formats that all operators must meet.
- Develop professional qualifications to attract, upskill, and retain staff.
- Facilitate knowledge sharing across the industry.

Public Perception and Education

- Improve the perception of buses, e.g., targeted advertising campaigns that highlight the environmental, financial, and convenience benefits of bus travel, positioning it as a green and responsible choice.
- Leverage local influencers and educational campaigns to help reshape public perceptions and make buses more appealing to a broader audience.

Delivery Model for the Regions

- There is limited appetite for franchising in the regions. Consequently, there is a need for an effective alternative to support these areas in delivering bus service improvements

We note that by March 2025 the Bus Centre for Excellence site had been updated, which is encouraging, albeit with a significant hiatus. With this in mind, and as the pace of franchising continues apace, we recommend that:

- e. Bus Centre of Excellence: developing a robust EP best-practise evidence base
- The Bus Centre of Excellence should facilitate similar events to the South East Enhanced Partnerships Chair event, across the whole of the country to collect a robust evidence base of what is working and what more needs to be done to further improve the outcomes of Enhanced Partnerships.

Indeed, we are encouraged that Stelios Rodoulis, Head of the Bus Centre of Excellence said that “We look forward to repeating this event with other sub-national bodies across the country.” This process should be expedited to ensure that best practice can be developed and shared with LTAs.

- f. Bus Centre of Excellence - providing better networking opportunities
- The ambitions of the Centre are laudable but it's unclear from the organisation's website whether it is as active as it intended to be.
 - Events and networking opportunities which are designed to spread best-practice for delivering Enhanced Partnerships should be given much greater priority and prominence.





Conclusion

Franchising is not the only way to deliver meaningful control over a city-wide bus network. Enhanced Partnerships offer a compelling alternative model with a number of benefits compared with franchising.

Enhanced Partnerships are already delivering bus improvements and giving greater control to locally elected politicians. But they can do even more. With more time, greater government support (particularly adequate long-term funding) and meaningful operator and LTA engagement they have the potential to improve bus services for local communities whilst avoiding many of the downsides of franchising.

Often the most effective policy-making is incremental rather than radical: Enhanced Partnerships should be allowed to continue their evolution - just a number of years after their establishment and against the backdrop of challenging economic circumstances - in order for their full potential to be realised.

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