

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Rural connectivity](#), HC 1077

Wednesday 25 January 2023

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Iain Stewart (Chair); Mike Amesbury; Ruth Cadbury; Paul Howell; Chris Loder; Karl McCartney; Grahame Morris; Greg Smith.

Questions 1–107

Witnesses

[I](#): Councillor Ray Bryan, Portfolio Holder for Highways, Travel and Environment, Dorset Council; Andrew Summers, Strategic Director, Transport East; and Chris Hinchliff, Campaigns Manager, CPRE, the countryside charity.

[II](#): Richard Stevens MBE, Managing Director, Go South West; Mark Hopwood CBE, Managing Director, Great Western Railway; and Graham Vidler, Chief Executive Officer, Confederation of Passenger Transport.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Councillor Bryan, Andrew Summers and Chris Hinchliff.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning. Welcome to this session of the Transport Select Committee. Before we get going, can I ask you to say who you are and what your position is?

Andrew Summers: Good morning, everyone. I am Andrew Summers, strategic director of Transport East, which is the sub-national transport body for Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Southend and Thurrock.

Chris Hinchliff: Hello, everyone. I am Chris Hinchliff. I am the campaigns manager for CPRE, the countryside charity.

Councillor Bryan: Good morning, everybody. I am Councillor Ray Bryan. I hold the portfolio for highways, travel and environment, which includes our declared climate emergency.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you all very much for your time this morning and for answering our questions. Before I turn to my colleagues, can I start with a very general scene-setter question? Whose job is it to ensure that rural area residents have the transport links that they need for work, education and leisure?

Andrew Summers: We are a partnership of local authorities, both district and local transport authorities. We are funded by local transport authorities and Government. We feel that, ultimately, it is the responsibility of that partnership to provide the outcomes that you have just described: economic, environmental and social outcomes for residents living in rural communities.

Our local authorities are incredibly ambitious. We are a region where one in three people lives in a rural area. We are the lead sub-national transport body across England on tackling rural mobility. Unfortunately, two thirds of our people who live in rural areas live in a transport desert; they cannot access services, education and training realistically by any means aside from the private car. Our local authorities, working with Government, feel responsible for helping to drive this forward, with the private sector, communities, parish councils and the support of the public.

Q3 **Chair:** Thank you. Councillor Bryan.

Councillor Bryan: I believe that the function lies with the local council, as far as providing public transport is concerned. Of course, what it does not have is the money to do it. That is why meetings like this are so important. I am here not just representing Dorset's area. There are a lot of rural areas around the UK that suffer with exactly the same thing as Dorset—underfunding of the public transport network. Over the last few months, we have worked very hard to try to get all the stakeholders together to make sure that we are all singing from the same hymn sheet,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

so that when we get the chance to put forward further proposals to Government for cash we have a uniform approach.

Q4 **Chair:** Thank you. Finally, Mr Hinchliff.

Chris Hinchliff: I agree with what Councillor Bryan said. Councils should be empowered to deliver those services. As Mr Summers commented, the services are not being delivered currently. Research by CPRE shows that more than half of the small towns across the south-west and north-east of the country are transport deserts or at risk of becoming one, meaning that people living there have no viable alternative to the private car to go about their day-to-day business. If we are to see the public transport services that you described delivered, we believe it needs to come with funding and empowerment from central Government to allow local government to ensure that those services are being delivered.

Q5 **Chair:** To what extent are these challenges long-standing ones that have not been addressed for a number of years? To what extent has the pandemic either exacerbated or helped to resolve some of the challenges?

Chris Hinchliff: Is that for me?

Chair: It is to all three of you—whoever wants to start.

Councillor Bryan: You are probably aware that we are a new unitary. We have been formed for only three and a half years, so we are still finding our way, putting six councils together into one.

When we inherited this particular problem, one thing became highly obvious. Although everybody associates Dorset with being a very wealthy area, we have some quite deprived areas. Weymouth and Portland are within the top 20 deprived areas. One of the difficulties we have is that we have a vast amount of land and the population is spread far and wide. I have a plan to create a hub-and-spoke system, where we use small vehicles to bring people in from the rural areas to the main bus routes. We can then make those main bus routes profitable so that they keep going.

At the moment, we are getting a lot of routes passed back to us at short notice, so we have had to redesign our approach to providing public transport. We now rent buses and drivers from the bus companies and run the service ourselves. At least that way, we can keep the revenue, set the prices ourselves and make sure that we provide the network that is required.

Andrew Summers: We published our transport strategy last year. In it, we identified that accessibility in our rural populations is one of the key problems in the east of England. In answer to your question, we see it as a systemic problem which needs a systems-thinking approach to start to solve it. Looking at the situation in the east of England, nearly half of carbon emissions from transport come from trips that start or end or are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

totally within rural areas. If you want to solve the national carbon issue, tackling rural areas is as fundamental as tackling urban areas.

We have significant areas where there is social isolation. I have spoken to colleagues across the region, including people in north Norfolk, for example. For young people there to access skills post 16, they have to spend nearly £1,000 a year going from places like Cromer to Norwich to upskill. We are talking about economic, social and environmental issues.

Our strategy sets out a systems approach to solve that. It is not just about moving people, although moving people, so supporting bus services, is fundamental. It is also about how you can support getting services to people in rural areas—for example, through mobile facilities and by making better use of local facilities. Norfolk County Council recently outlined proposals for a 20-minute neighbourhood. How can that sort of proposal support getting services to people, with people accessing things in their local area?

The third area of our strategy is around digital. Can people start to achieve the outcomes they want to achieve through digital means, with better connectivity? That is where challenges such as poor broadband and poor 3G, 4G and 5G connectivity in rural areas really come into play. In answer to your question, there is a systemic challenge.

As regards how you solve it, more bus services are a good thing, but the bus must have a chance as it goes through towns and rural areas. We are competing with the private car. The private car is inherently more attractive to many people in rural areas than the bus, which impacts on patronage and the viability of that bus. An integrated transport approach is required to tackle both the demand side and the supply side.

Q6 **Chair:** Chris, do you have anything to add?

Chris Hinchliff: Yes. I agree with what Mr Summers said about its being a systemic issue. Our assessment of the connectivity of rural towns across the south-west and north-east of the country took place before the pandemic. At that stage, there was already a clear problem of transport deserts. We undertook a number of freedom of information requests across local authorities covering rural areas in the country and found that there was a real postcode lottery in how the provision of socially necessary services is happening. In many places, local authorities are not undertaking a systemic and comprehensive overview. Rather, they are reacting to the withdrawal of private services on an ad hoc basis.

That speaks to the fact that the real problem is the attempt to deliver rural bus services through a private network that relies on profitability. Many rural areas are never going to have the population density to be able to support the level of services that those communities need, at a profitable rate. We need the Government to step in to ensure that a comprehensive bus network is delivered through central funding.



Q7 **Greg Smith:** Good morning, everyone. Before we unpack some of the issues that just came out about how rural connectivity can be improved, for the benefit of the inquiry, can you take us through how a lack of connectivity from a transport perspective affects rural communities? I represent a rural constituency, so I think I know what you are going to say. I appreciate the digital point that Andrew Summers made, but we are looking at the transport elements here. Perhaps Mr Summers first.

Andrew Summers: We have a number of examples across the region. To answer this, we did a survey of all of our parishes in the east of England region. We concluded it in December. We are about to publish the results, but I asked for some of the early findings for this session. Over 400 parishes responded, which was a good response rate of 35%. What the survey identified was a lack of core facilities in a majority of parishes across the region, which exacerbates our rural connectivity and lack of accessibility to services. Only four in 10 of our parishes said that they had basic grocery supplies. Five in 10 had a primary school; in five in 10 parishes, people have to travel outside them every day to get to a primary school. Interestingly, only 18% had access to fuel in their own parish.

For some of the very basic things that people want to do in their day-to-day life, they have to travel outside their parish area even to start to achieve them. If you do not have access to a private car, for example, the ability to do that impacts significantly on your skill level and your social isolation. There really are some issues around people needing to travel to access services that are absolutely fundamental to their day-to-day life.

Q8 **Greg Smith:** Can I pick up on that and add this question before Mr Hinchliff and Councillor Bryan answer? To the Chairman's earlier question about whether this is a new thing, with the impact of the pandemic, and how things were before, can you comment on the effect of certain public service changes? For example, in my own constituency we have seen a bit of a move away from smaller, village-based GP surgeries to primary care preferring to have bigger, multi-doctor practices in towns. How much has that change in various public services—it does not have to be healthcare—exacerbated the connectivity problem?

Andrew Summers: Quite significantly. It was almost independent of the pandemic, although, interestingly, the pandemic started to deliver a return to some local services and we have started to see some benefits. For example, in Norfolk a number of village pubs started to become community hubs during that period. They used the function room that they had used for events to create a village shop. That allowed people to access groceries, which I mentioned earlier, within their local community, rather than having to travel a long way to supermarkets to do that. Post pandemic, of course, we have started to see the return to long-distance travel to access those services. I think you are right. As we move away from service provision in local areas, it increases the need to travel elsewhere and causes isolation and exclusion for a number of people.



Chris Hinchliff: I completely agree with what was said about the exacerbating issue of out-of-town services. It is a growing problem and shows how important it is to relate our public transport provision to effective planning of our communities, to ensure that people are able to access services, wherever possible through active travel—walking or cycling—and to avoid the need for long-distance travel, which, of course, makes it harder for those who do not have access to private cars in rural areas.

As regards the issues that this causes, we have heard about loneliness and isolation in older people. There is a growing issue of gentrification of rural areas, which is pricing out low-income people, perhaps in key worker roles, who cannot afford to own their own car. There are environmental pollution issues around carbon emissions and microplastics.

I would like to focus on the impacts on younger people, which are particularly stark. CPRE undertook a survey of young people across rural communities to identify why they felt they wanted to leave those areas. Eighty-six per cent. of the 16 to 25-year-olds we surveyed who want to leave rural areas cited infrequent and unreliable public transport as one of the key issues. There is a very similar figure for them for loneliness and isolation as well. It is taking a particularly big toll on younger people living in rural communities.

Councillor Bryan: To give you a couple of figures, in 2018-19, we had 8.2 million passenger journeys. During the pandemic, that went down to 2.4—quite a catastrophic drop. Bear in mind that the bus companies were still having to finance the buses and provide services. We have had a slight recovery, to 4.8 million in the year 2021-22, but we are still seeing reluctance from people to get on the bus because connectivity on it is not working quite right. That is what we have to try to beat.

As you are aware, it is a statutory requirement that we provide school transport for children, but that only takes us to the age of 16. Because there are dedicated buses to get children to school, the 16 to 18-year-olds cannot get on those, so we now need to redesign it to make it easy for the 16 to 18-year-olds to get on the buses. To be honest, I think we should look at trying to fund that, rather than expect the youngsters to pay for their own transport to school when it is a requirement that they have to go to school.

It is important that we look at the way we have pushed public transport into an area that is not functioning right. I get very envious when I come to London because a bus passes you every five or six seconds. I have 91 buses covering the whole of Dorset, of which over 50% are below the emission standards that are required. We are trying to find a way in which we can take on electric buses, but with our being a rural area, the danger is that they will run out of charge. We are one of the first areas that now has hydrogen production within our county. We have a



hydrogen production plant that has just gone into operation, in the last few weeks. We are looking at introducing some hydrogen buses, which will enable us to get to faraway places and comply with the emission standards.

Q9 **Greg Smith:** That is very helpful. Colleagues will come on to buses and rail specifically later. I will keep the helicopter in the air, looking down at the bigger picture, at the moment. With no constraint, what does good look like? Where should the priority sit in defining that? I particularly want to get at the fact that, for a rural community, there is a difference between going from village to village and getting from the villages into major towns, cities or places. In my constituency, for example, there are 130 parishes, but we are surrounded by major towns and cities—Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, Bicester and so on. Should the priority be how you get people into those major conurbations or the grid for the network of villages?

Councillor Bryan: As you highlighted earlier, with the pandemic things have moved away from the rural community a little and have become connected in the larger towns. We have to find a way in which we can get people from the rural community into those areas. It is not going to be easy. Ideally, I would like to see us providing a 30-minute service on public transport, so that you have a bus coming along every 30 minutes. When you look at London, you get them every few seconds. The rural area has been left very much behind.

Q10 **Greg Smith:** Can I dig in a little? You say that there should be a bus every 30 minutes in a county as large as Dorset, Buckinghamshire, Lincolnshire or wherever it might be, but where to? Is that a bus every 30 minutes to Dorchester from wherever you are, or is it a bus every 30 minutes that might take you somewhere else in the county?

Councillor Bryan: To go back to something I said earlier, that is why we are trying to create the hub and spoke, where we use smaller buses, which will probably be dial-up, to get you to the main routes. On those main routes, we need a service that is at least every 30 minutes to get you into the main towns. Does that answer your question?

Q11 **Greg Smith:** It does. I want to come back on a couple of other points, but can I get an answer to that question from Mr Hinchliff and Mr Summers?

Chris Hinchliff: We would say that the priority is putting the ability to design bus services under the guiding mind of local authorities. We should give them the ability to set out contracts that allow local authorities, which have the best knowledge of their area, to design the network that works for their communities.

On what good looks like overall, in a best-case scenario, we have set out that vision in our report "Every village, every hour", which looks at case studies from Switzerland and Germany where they have minimum service standards enshrined in law and there is at least an hourly bus service for



every community of over 300 people—in some cases, down to 100—that runs from 6 am to midnight, seven days a week and 365 days a year. In that report, we have modelled how much it would cost to deliver that across this country. The way we did that modelling was to have arterial routes between the major towns that would run on a half-hourly basis, and then what we have described as capillary services interconnecting all of the smaller communities to bring them up to that standard. They would run on at least an hourly basis.

Andrew Summers: It is also place-based. We should take a place-based approach. Take the east of England, for example. You have rural that looks very different in different parts. Epping Forest is on the outskirts of London. It has more tube stations than Hackney, but that is the only way to get in and out of the place sustainably. I have worked with colleagues in Epping Forest who say that they have significant rural challenges if you are not trying to get on the line to London.

North Norfolk is a completely different type of place. It has very poor public transport and is quite far north. It has significant tourism, but a lot of social isolation. Compare that with somewhere like Maldon, which is on the coast as well but further down, and where a lot of it is predicated on the former fishing and port industry. Those are very different types of rural places, with different types of challenges.

In our strategy, we advocated that you need to set out what outcomes you are trying to achieve, which are, as we have talked about today, better accessibility, connectivity to services and reducing carbon emissions, and to have a framework that empowers the local authority to make the decisions there. That comes on to what we may be talking about later—giving local authorities more funding certainty over the future and more powers to be able to integrate transport services to deliver a place-based solution for their local area, taking into account what local residents want to achieve and what the local situation is.

Q12 **Greg Smith:** It is almost as if you read my mind on the geography point. My next point was going to be this. In the here and now, how much does geography come into whether certain rural communities have a good, bad or horrendous service? Some of that will undoubtedly be linked to whether there is a railway line, or not, and a station, or not, going back to the hub-and-spoke model. Would it be fair to say that, in your own experience, in the deserts or the oasis of transport, geography plays a massive role for a lot of rural communities? I think you have already answered that, Mr Summers. Mr Hinchliff?

Chris Hinchliff: I think that geography plays a part. I certainly echo what you said about railway connectivity being crucial as well. In our assessment of transport deserts across the south-west, we saw that Devon and Cornwall had a higher proportion of better-connected places. That is due in part to the fact that they have a wider rail network across their counties compared with areas like Dorset and Somerset. Those counties have also continued to invest increasing amounts in their bus



HOUSE OF COMMONS

network, while some of the less well-connected areas are in county councils that have cut back on their bus funding. The two things come into play together.

Q13 Greg Smith: I turn to Councillor Bryan. I then have one last question before we get into specific transport things.

Councillor Bryan: It is interesting to note that in Dorset, of course, we have a vast area of outstanding natural beauty, which means that the houses get pretty well dispersed, so it is always going to be difficult to try to give a regular service to those outlying areas. We also have triple SIs and all sorts of other areas. Probably 60% or 70% of our land is covered by these territories. It means that the towns have the predominant function for public transport, but it is a problem for us that it is so dispersed.

Chris Hinchliff: Can I come back very briefly on that point, to relate it to one of the case studies that I mentioned to do with international examples? North Hesse, which is a region in Germany where they have the every village, every hour network of connectivity, has lower population density than any region in England. There is the possibility to deliver that when you take the right approach.

Q14 Greg Smith: This is the last question. Everybody said money. I am not diminishing that answer—money is important. Other than money, what are the blockers?

Andrew Summers: For me, it is the integration of decision making—systems thinking and empowering local authorities to have the ability to make decisions over a large number of areas. At present, decisions that are taken that impact on transport in rural areas are made in numerous different locations, without join-up of that decision making. Some decisions, for example on levelling-up bids, are made in Government. Some decisions are made locally, by district councils. Some are made by public transport operators. Some are made by companies. If we can integrate that decision making by empowering the local authority to have more control or oversight of it, we will get better outcomes in the long run.

Chris Hinchliff: The second important point is around regulation. What makes those international examples work well is that the authorities in charge of them are able to set a one-network, one-timetable, one-ticket approach, where services pulse, if you like, down the routes at regular clock-face intervals. People know when their services are due to arrive. That really helps to push up public transport use, which makes the whole thing more affordable.

Greg Smith: Got it.

Councillor Bryan: If we provide a service that is reliable, is on time and has the right appearance, with facilities on board, it will make a big difference. That is something we are working on. For me, the one good



HOUSE OF COMMONS

thing that has come out of BSIP is the fact that we are now talking to all the bus operators and other stakeholders about plans for the future. The difficulty is that plans for the future require funding; we keep going back to that. Until we can reach that stage, most of the plans we have will stay where they are, as plans. I have committed myself to making sure that, whatever we do on public transport, I will deliver some of the promises that I have made, but I need help.

Q15 Chris Loder: Good morning, gentlemen. It is good to see you and to have you with us today. Chris, I want to start by asking you a question. To what extent are bus services in rural England not really fit for purpose today?

Chris Hinchliff: I think it is the case that they are not very fit in quite a large way.

Q16 Chris Loder: The question is, to what extent?

Chris Hinchliff: The best I can do to answer that, I suppose, is refer back to the extent to which transport deserts exist across rural communities. Given that the connectivity is not there, clearly those bus services are not providing the network that people need. Partially, that is down to the fact that socially necessary bus services, which, of course, were part of the 1985 Transport Act, have never been fully defined, so we have quite a postcode lottery in how authorities define that.

Q17 Chris Loder: If you had a blank canvas and could say, "Right, we're going to do this," what would you do?

Chris Hinchliff: As I said, the most important thing is to have minimum service standards and that commitment—

Q18 Chris Loder: So that we are clear, you are advocating every village, every hour. Is that correct?

Chris Hinchliff: Yes, with a caveat.

Q19 Chris Loder: How do you know that there is a demand to do that?

Chris Hinchliff: Obviously, the demand will grow over time. In the first instance—

Q20 Chris Loder: In my constituency in rural Dorset, I have 132 parishes. They vary in terms of population between some with 30 people, maybe even 20, and some with maybe 800 or 900. How can you be clear that the policy you are advocating would be a good use of taxpayers' money for every parish? I think that is what you are advocating.

Chris Hinchliff: I put in the caveat that the villages in every village, every hour are defined around a population of about 300 people, so there is a threshold. As to why we think that is something that is needed, there is evidence from the international examples. The canton of Zurich in Switzerland covers a wide area of land and they have public transport trips per capita around six times higher than ours.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q21 **Chris Loder:** Are you completely wedded to a subsidised business model for buses, or do you think there is any role to play for the commercial industry?

Chris Hinchliff: Where services can be delivered commercially, we don't have any ideological problem with that. The issue is around whether those services will be delivered if it is left to commercial provision.

Q22 **Chris Loder:** What makes you think it won't be?

Chris Hinchliff: The fact that it is not being delivered currently, and has not been delivered for a very long time.

Q23 **Chris Loder:** When you say a very long time, can you be a bit more specific? I think there may be some areas of the country that may dispute that comment, in that there are some parts of the country and some rural areas where commercial bus operation actually works very well. I am just drilling in a little bit on how long you think long is.

Chris Hinchliff: That is absolutely right. There will be areas that are getting the service they need from commercial provision, and we do not dispute that. The fact is that there is a wider area beyond that which does not receive that provision.

Q24 **Chris Loder:** You are advocating that, regardless of whether there is demand at the moment to do it.

Chris Hinchliff: Part of the reason why we advocate it is the climate emergency, which I think is an important background to bear in mind in this debate. Research suggests that we need to see traffic reduction in the order of 27% or so by the end of this decade. For that to be something that can be delivered in a fair way that allows rural communities to continue to thrive, the people who live in those areas need a viable alternative.

Q25 **Chris Loder:** Are you certain that it is a better policy for you to adopt than, say, for example, better power provision for electric vehicles in rural areas?

Chris Hinchliff: Yes, because the traffic issues, and indeed the traffic reduction, is still based on a shift to electric vehicles.

Q26 **Chris Loder:** Thank you very much. Andrew, can you tell us what sub-national transport bodies bring to the party when it comes to rural connectivity and rural transport?

Andrew Summers: Rural connectivity is a strategic issue. While a lot of the impacts are felt locally, you also have to look across the region. When we went through our public transport strategy consultation, it was one of the key issues that people in our region brought to the table, and individually we did not have a solution.

Q27 **Chris Loder:** I understand all that. What is the sub-national transport body's role? What do you bring in all of this discussion?



Andrew Summers: What we have done is develop a centre of excellence for rural mobility. We have just set that up. It aims to provide evidence, data and insights for our partners to understand the issues and challenges around rural mobility—for example, the survey I just described—and then work through with our partners what might be the types of models and interventions they would collectively develop and learn from each other. We are not at the minute a transport authority ourselves, but it is about insight, evidence base and convening.

Q28 **Chris Loder:** Tell me what the cost base of the Transport East sub-national transport body is, roughly.

Andrew Summers: We are funded by two sources. One is local authorities; 24 districts and five local transport authorities who collectively invest £250,000 a year. We have a grant from the Government as well.

Q29 **Chris Loder:** How much is it, all put together, roughly?

Andrew Summers: Just over £1 million per year at present.

Q30 **Chris Loder:** If you weren't there—if the sub-national transport body was not in existence—I am guessing that the £1 million would go to, I hope, rural buses or rural transport.

Andrew Summers: That would be a decision for the Department for Transport. They allocate the funding.

Q31 **Chris Loder:** If you were not there, would we miss you? That is what I am asking.

Andrew Summers: There is a huge amount of work that all sub-national transport bodies do to convene; to identify regional priorities; and to avoid duplication and wastage. It is actually the capacity and capability that we provide that all of our 24 districts and five LTAs benefit from, rather than each of them doing it by themselves. There are huge efficiencies in sub-national transport bodies.

Q32 **Chris Loder:** Thank you very much. Ray, from your perspective, not just for Dorset but for wider rural Britain and particularly rural England, do you have a view as to the extent to which bus services are not fit for purpose today?

Councillor Bryan: It is summed up by one word: large. It is a large extent. For a number of years, we have seen reduction in the services that are available. It is purely down to money. The bus companies are there to make money, so they need to make the money.

Q33 **Chris Loder:** Earlier, you were advocating a hub-and-spoke model.

Councillor Bryan: I am.

Q34 **Chris Loder:** That is a bit different from your village-by-the-hour model, I am guessing. How realistic do you think it is that we could see such an



initiative being implemented? If so, what is the barrier to implementing it?

Councillor Bryan: I feel quite passionate on this, Chris. As you are probably aware, it is something we have worked very hard on to make sure that it is going to work in partnership with the bus companies. We have a number of minibus companies that work privately. We are looking at bringing those into it. We are looking at using our own green minibuses that are used for adult care, and utilising those during the day to provide the feeder system. I think that will resolve some of the problems. The difficulty is that it needs a whole redesign of where we are today.

Q35 **Chris Loder:** The available finances are clearly an issue for you, from the discussions we have been having so far this morning. Could you share any insights you have about the difficulties on the financial front? I am assuming that you have a number of pressures from the council perspective, and I am assuming that adult care and childcare always have to take priority. Where does transport sit in terms of those financial priorities? Can you tell us how much the Government are actually supporting you with transport for rural Dorset?

Councillor Bryan: It is a known fact that because of our age demographics—people like me, of more mature years—we tend to demand more of the adult services.

Q36 **Chris Loder:** Is that a theme across rural Britain where, generally, rural areas have that higher demographic?

Councillor Bryan: There are some areas where the younger generation is in predominance, but certainly when you get to the rural areas it is thought that the more mature person is likely to move out to the countryside, so that puts the pressure on.

Q37 **Chris Loder:** I am assuming that means concessionary bus passes are used much more.

Councillor Bryan: Absolutely. That is something we desperately need to look at. I can give you an example. On one particular route, which actually goes through the area you represent, Chris, we have a situation where, if I get on the bus, the bus company gets 92p if I use my bus pass. I don't use it, but I have one. If a youngster gets on the bus, it is £13 for the same route.

Q38 **Chris Loder:** Do you mean to tell me that a walk-up commercial fare would be £13, yet if I was in receipt of a bus pass the bus operator would get 92p?

Councillor Bryan: Yes. Can I put some clarity on that? The £13 is a return fare, whereas the 92p is per journey. It is £1.84 as against £13.

Q39 **Chris Loder:** That is quite considerable.

Councillor Bryan: Yes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q40 **Chris Loder:** We wonder why there is a problem with providing rural bus services from the commercial operation, but that has almost explained it, particularly in areas that have a higher demographic with high use of the concessionary bus pass. That almost completely explains why the commercials of rural bus operation do not work.

Councillor Bryan: Yes. Between 25% and 30% of the population of Dorset have a bus pass.

Q41 **Chris Loder:** Is it a Government decision as to how much money is paid to the bus operator?

Councillor Bryan: I believe so, yes.

Chris Loder: Thank you. I will leave it there, Chair, and come back to other things a bit later.

Q42 **Chair:** Before I turn to Paul and Karl on buses, can I clarify this? Councillor Bryan, you have referred a couple of times to having a dial-a-bus or supportive network. Are you referring to what is known as DRT—demand-responsive transit—where you would not have a bus route going through a fixed number of villages, but a demand base of minibuses going around to people?

Councillor Bryan: We are actually going to end up providing two different types of service. One is where you have a real rural area, and it would not be worth running a regular bus. You would literally dial the bus to come to your home. That will be a chargeable thing. We have to find a way around that because some people cannot afford it any more, with the cost of living and everything else. It is a regular conversation nowadays.

My priority will be to get buses working on fingers, going out into the rural areas. At the moment, we are looking at whether we can connect them to our car-parking network. People would drive in their car to the car park and then pick up a feeder bus to get into the main network. We are trying to reduce the number of cars coming into the cities, for the obvious reason of emissions; and from a financial point of view we need to make it so that it is—I hate the word cheaper—less expensive to get on the bus than it is to take the car.

It is no secret. We have just announced our budget for next year. Some of the car-parking money that I collect is for highways. We are looking to have to use some of that now on subsidising the public transport network. It is ringfenced within highways, so we will look at spending some of any surplus we have on the public network.

Q43 **Paul Howell:** Chair, you picked up a point I was going to ask about demand-responsive transport. I will follow up on that as an initial point.

In my constituency of Sedgefield I have to cross between the Tees Valley Combined Authority and County Durham. In the combined authority we have what is called Tees Flex, which is something that has been put in by



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Tees Valley Mayor. It is in a trial period at the moment. It seems to me to have the particular potential for connecting rural communities to the arterial routes, for want of a better phrase. I want to see what you think about that.

To build on something that was said earlier about crossing boundaries, I have a village which is right on the boundary but on the wrong side of the boundary in terms of that connection. The Tees Flex will not come into County Durham, but the people in the village normally shop or go to hospitals in the Tees Valley area, because that is where the county line is drawn, so to speak. I would welcome a little bit of commentary about how you would deal with that situation at the boundaries of your sub-regions. I will come to you first, Andrew, and take comments.

Andrew Summers: Thank you very much. This is where sub-national transport bodies and partnerships come into place, to be able to provide those structures across borders.

In the east, we have a number of DRT services that are up and running. A lot of ambitious and progressive local authorities, both county and district, are really pushing them forward. For example, in East Suffolk, they have three pilots on the go at the minute. What they have done is develop a good model that can work cross-boundary as well. If you have a community provider, as a number of authorities do, it allows that community provider to operate across services. There is a reduction of back-office requirements; for example, the app for customer information can operate across boundaries as well. You may need a local authority—for example, East Suffolk—to drive it forward. Working in partnership with neighbouring local authorities is possible through the forums that are in place.

One of the things that Transport East has done is to create a bus forum, working with DFT and our local authorities. We had our first meeting yesterday. One of the things that came out of BSIPs was having the structure to be able to have those conversations.

Those types of DRT pilots are up and running across the region. Essex has DigiGo. Swaffham in Norfolk, for example, has a flexi bus service with 1,000 users a week. It is successful, but what they all say is that, beyond the pilot, it is about the ongoing subsidy to make the operation viable in the long run. Some of the things they are starting to look at is whether you can use section 106 or developer funding, for example. East Suffolk has the benefit of Sizewell coming in place, and EDF supporting that work. Is there innovation we can use with the private sector, working cross-border in partnerships, to drive this forward? There is ambition and models are being developed. It is now whether we can roll that out at post-pilot stage to create a long-term viable service.

Q44 **Paul Howell:** You have mentioned BSIP a couple of times. I want to come back on that before I move along the panel. In the north-east we have a great BSIP settlement, apparently, but it has not actually been



HOUSE OF COMMONS

formally signed off yet because of the things that were going on with the devolution deal and things like that. There are still bits to be resolved.

One of the things that will come out of the BSIP is subsidy to fares. There have been some trials in terms of the £2 fare capping which was introduced and things like that. Could you give us a sense as to how much difference you think that is making?

Andrew Summers: In the east, four out of five of our local transport authorities did not get BSIP funding. There were particular concerns among the region for that. It was a big bidding process, for which they did not receive funding.

On the £2 fare, we have spoken to operators and local authorities. It is quite early to say, but Essex, for example, said it had been going for 17 or 18 days and they are still waiting for the outcome, but 89% of Essex passengers are covered by that £2 fare. The coverage is quite significant among passengers. We are still waiting for results as to whether it has had any difference at all.

Q45 **Paul Howell:** You cannot give a sense as to its significance at this stage. I will let the other panel members come in, but there is one other point for you to think about at the same time. We have talked a lot about getting services to rural villages. My colleague Chris asked about how we rated rural services.

The figures from the north-east are that 10% of people think bus services are either poor or terrible. If you look at the rural bit, 31% think they are poor or terrible. There is a very clear distinction, from what Transport North East are telling me, about the rural perspective versus the overall perspective of buses. I wanted to put that into the space.

Looking at the rural villages, there are very many different types of rural villages, as has been discussed. I do not think you have yet touched on the comparators in, for want of a better word, levels of deprivation. You talked about the need for people to use cars. If you have a village where low car ownership is very extreme, and then the bus does not come, they have literally nowhere to go, whether that is going to the DWP and in the end getting sanctioned, going to the shops or socially, or whatever it is. In an assessment of effort in fixing bus services, what do you think should happen in consideration of the need of the village as opposed to anything else? Can we start with you, Ray, on that perspective?

Councillor Bryan: I keep saying that we have to redesign the system we have because it is not working. Utilisation of buses is habit-forming. We have to find a way in which we can find the funding to actually run the buses. That could mean that we have to subsidise the fares for a little while.

When we did our BSIP proposal, we bid for £130 million. We got nothing.

Q46 **Paul Howell:** Can I interrupt? I want you to expand on a particular point, because of what you have said. DRT is a concept that people are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not familiar with. On your point about habit-forming, if you are going to introduce a new type of transport where people call for a bus in the way they call for a taxi, you need them to believe it will happen because reliability is awful.

Councillor Bryan: It comes down to the fact that far too often we talk about the capital element. We have to talk about the revenue element. For the bus services to get used, you have to have availability at low cost. In rural areas you cannot afford to run buses to some of the rural areas, so you have to have dial-up. It is whether the dial-up is paid for by the person using the bus or subsidised from the centre. That is the big issue.

At the moment, we cannot afford to do it. We have to find a way of funding it. We are working very closely with our local bus companies to try to resolve some of these issues, but it is no secret that we had three major bus operators in the Dorset area. One of them is now out of business. That is my fear. If we do not do something fairly soon, there is always the risk that the bus service gets less and less. What we need to do is turn it round so that we get more and more people using public transport, which gets them out of their car and which means they control emissions. To me, it makes it more sociable. I am showing my age now, but going back a few years, when I used to get on a bus, you always used to have a chat with the person next to you. It encouraged the mental outlook by talking and mixing with people. We have lost all of that. I think it is a great shame.

Paul Howell: We could continue this conversation for a while, but I am getting nudged from the Chair that I have been going on for a little while. Unless you have anything specific, Chris, I will move to my colleague and you can interject at that point.

Q47 **Karl McCartney:** Andrew, you have probably covered some of the things I am going to ask the other two about, but if you want to dip in, feel free to. I am not cutting you out, but I am conscious of the time.

Chris, I want to push back against some of the figures you have put out. I know that in your professional life you will know more than me about what carbon does and does not do, but obviously it keeps the countryside alive and green. On whether or not people are going to be in EVs in totality in this country by 2030, 2040 or 2050, many of us think that is not the case, certainly not in rural areas, but we will park that one.

I want to ask you about the German model that you mentioned a short while ago. I represent Lincoln. Lincolnshire is very rural. I am conscious that my Lincoln constituents, while not a million miles outside the city, cannot use buses because there aren't any. That is less than 10 miles outside Lincoln. There just is not that opportunity.

I have always pushed for park and ride and a similar system to Exeter, which is what the German model seems to be a little bit like. There are lots of smaller minibuses, which you talked about, Councillor Bryan. How



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is it funded? Is it all through subsidy or have private companies invested in new vehicles? Do you know, or can you point us in the direction of how we could find out, what that model is? It sounds like that may be where we need to rethink the model of how we provide services to make them enticing for people. As you say, it is the regularity, which is what Exeter has done since, I think, the early 1980s with their park-and-ride system.

Chris Hinchliff: This is a particularly interesting example for your area. North Hesse has a very similar geographic and demographic spread to Lincolnshire, so they are quite comparable. We see what could be achieved there, so it could be, you would hope, achievable in Lincolnshire. It is delivered through central funding which pays for the services. Then they aim to recoup a certain percentage of their costs through the fare revenue.

Q48 **Karl McCartney:** Do you know how they funded the new buses—the minibuses?

Chris Hinchliff: On the specifics of that, no, I would have to get back to you.

Q49 **Karl McCartney:** We can find out.

Councillor Bryan, coming to you very quickly, you mentioned you have 80 or so buses in your area. Listening to what Chris has just said, obviously we all know and understand that bus companies want to sweat their assets, but large buses travelling down rural lanes is not really where we are at this point in time. They are never going to be full, so I can see why you are pushing on this.

How are you going to fund it, or where are you seeking it from? You mentioned some of your own services at the moment, but are you expecting private bus operators to move away from large, 50-plus seater single-deckers and double-deckers to more modern minibuses?

Councillor Bryan: To be honest, for the plan to work we have to persuade the bus companies to move down the smaller bus route. It is all about working together. We can fund the bus route, but after a year, if it is not making money, the bus company just gives it back to us. What I do not want to do is set the hares running on something that I cannot complete. That is why the plan we are trying to create in Dorset has long-term views.

I have actually sent you the briefing notes that I received. Hopefully, you will see information there that you will find quite useful for this. I hope that from the meeting today we are going to persuade you to set up a full inquiry into rural transport. I really would like to see Dorset as part of that, because I think we have a lot to offer. The offer is on the table. I will throw resource behind trying to get this to the forefront. I have had permission from the leader to offer that. We are very keen to work with you on trying to resolve the problems that are in front of us; we are the eyes and ears out in the marketplace, but we rely on you, as central Government, to help us deliver.



Q50 **Karl McCartney:** We have heard that offer loud and clear, and thank you very much indeed for that. I speak on behalf of the Chair and the Committee, obviously.

Finally, this is to all three of you. I mentioned Exeter as perhaps being a model that the German model may have extended, taking it from a city to a rural area. Are you aware of good models that we should look at across the country? I am aware personally, because I was brought up near Chester, that Chester has run a park-and-ride system. Yes, it is again a city but it has run it at a profit. I think that has been proved, certainly over the last decade-plus. I am also aware, although I have never been, that Glasgow has a very good park-and-ride system. Are you aware, whether in rural or in other areas, of models you might want to point us in the direction of, as something we should look at?

Councillor Bryan: Let me go away and do some research for you as to the best places. We have teams talking to the whole country now.

Q51 **Karl McCartney:** Chris or Andrew, do you have any suggestions?

Chris Hinchliff: I refer you to our research, and we can pass that on.

Andrew Summers: There are places within the region. East Suffolk, Braintree, Epping Forest, Uttlesford and North Norfolk are all doing good stuff. Outside the region, Cornwall is doing some very good stuff as well on bus franchising and the work they are doing to get more people using the bus. That seems a good example.

Karl McCartney: Thank you all very much indeed.

Chair: I am keen to move to rail and other issues shortly, but Mike and Grahame still have a few questions on bus services.

Q52 **Mike Amesbury:** Good morning, gentlemen. This is to Ray and Andrew first. It is on your experience of the BSIP process, and on the advice and feedback you may have received.

Councillor Bryan: As I said, we failed in our bid, which was a big disappointment. We then tried desperately to find out why we had failed. The information coming back to us as to why we had failed was very sparse. I met Baroness Vere to discuss it and we were promised some feedback. It took some time to come back.

We were advised to go for a regional support grant. We don't get any, so we cannot do that. We were then advised to go for levelling-up money. We put in a bid for levelling-up, but we failed on that. I am not sure where we can go now. I am seeking advice from the DFT as to what Dorset can do to get some help. We are willing to deliver, and we are willing to put some of our own money into it, but we need some help.

Q53 **Mike Amesbury:** I cover Cheshire West and Chester, which is quite a rural area of the country as well, and that bid failed. Thank you, Ray. Over to Andrew.



Andrew Summers: Within our region there are five local transport authorities. One secured BSIP funding, which was Norfolk, but the other four did not. The feedback from the four that did not was that there were challenges around the bidding process, which was very intensive over a long period of time without a result at the end. That probably leads to a more general comment that we have consistently made as an STB; we should reduce the number of bidding processes that we have, which are resource intensive, and dedicate that resource instead to planning services going forward, with a longer-term, guaranteed certainty of funding for local transport authorities to have the confidence to plan in the future and for partners to be able to plan with them and get private sector investment. That is one key point.

Feedback from that process, as Councillor Bryan said, is absolutely fundamental. Local authorities have to understand from Government where their bids were not right and how they can improve them in the future. What we have seen in the region with other bids is that feedback from Government has been very useful in honing business cases in the future. The feedback process is absolutely fundamental to better bids next time.

Our experience at the minute is that DFT has funded three of the STBs in the south-east of England: ourselves, Transport for the South East and England's Economic Heartland, to work alongside local authorities and the DFT to identify a programme for how those with BSIPs and those without BSIPs can be supported. As I said, we had our first bus forum yesterday. I think TFSE did as well. That is a process that is now going on. There is still a lot of work to do going forwards, and moving the funding regime from bidding to a more consistent long-term approach is definitely something that our LTAs would support.

Q54 **Mike Amesbury:** You have probably answered the key points there, Andrew. What is your opinion, your assessment, Chris? Was there a fair balance between rural and urban communities? How could it be improved? You referred to some examples in Germany, so maybe you could touch on those.

Chris Hinchliff: Yes. We had quite a lot of concerns about the way the BSIP process developed. We felt that the local authorities submitting their plans were being set up to fail in some cases because they did not know how much funding was realistically going to be available to them, or on what basis it was going to be allocated. We felt, from our perspective, that there was not enough on what a comprehensive rural bus network would look like. There was not enough guidance to ensure that every local authority was stepping up to that level. While in some BSIPs you see a plan for hourly rural and suburban routes, 7 am to 7 pm, there is another one that commits only to exploring inter-urban service frequencies. There are no set standards for rural areas.

In general, we found that the BSIP process guidance very strongly encouraged local authorities to focus on demand-responsive transport as



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the solution for rural areas, as opposed to regular services. While there is undoubtedly a role to be played by demand-responsive transport, we have concerns about that because the evidence suggests that DRT does not match the passenger transport numbers that you can achieve with regular fixed route services. Given that we need to reduce traffic for a number of reasons, that was quite a concern.

Q55 Mike Amesbury: Thank you. I have a final question for Andrew and Ray. Do you feel that rural areas have sufficient resources to compete in the bidding processes, not on this bit of spot funding, but others as well?

Councillor Bryan: When this bidding process was started we had to bring in outside people to help us plough through the paperwork that is required. We brought in a team of consultants who helped us greatly. Because the process is continually being updated, we have just updated our original proposal to see whether we can get anywhere with that, but it is always down to time. Time, of course, is money. Every time we get asked to produce one of these reports, you go into it thinking, "Am I wasting my time?" We have to get over that and say to ourselves, "Irrespective of whether we think it is a waste of time, we've got to do it because if you don't enter, you can't win."

It is a bit of a Catch-22 situation. We have to commit to the bidding process, but it is quite complicated. If I can just mention one thing, I secured £19 million for decarbonising our buildings. By God, it was difficult to actually spend the money within the restrictions that were then placed on it. This is something that central Government can look at, to try to make it easier for local councils to deal with funding once they have secured it. We have just been given some levelling-up money for Weymouth. We now have a few weeks to put the business plan together. Everything seems to take a long time to get an answer, and then you get a very short period of time to actually deliver it. That is something we could look at, going forward.

Q56 Mike Amesbury: Thank you, Ray. Andrew, it was a mixed bag for the east. You had some winners, but some losers.

Andrew Summers: Yes, but mainly those that did not. The simple answer to your question is probably no. Authorities in rural areas do not have the resource of a large authority to bid. As Councillor Bryan said, it is resource and time intensive. If you have very small teams, who are trying to deliver services as well as bid for them, they do not have the time and capacity to do that. That is why we consistently advocate a process by which you do not necessarily have to bid for funding but it is allocated on a different basis.

Q57 Grahame Morris: I have a quick point about the bus service operators grant and Government plans to change it. In your written evidence, Councillor Bryan, you said that rural areas needed long-term grant funding, both capital and revenue. How can the reform of bus service operators grant improve rural bus services, in your opinion?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Councillor Bryan: I go back to the situation where we can create the service, but you then have to build on it and build on it so that people get used to riding on buses. Without that, it is doomed to failure from day one.

Q58 **Grahame Morris:** I recognise your characterisation of bus services in Dorset because Durham is pretty poorly. In fact, I would like to nominate the 65 Go North East service in Durham for the worst bus service in the country. Our desire to encourage people to use bus services is based around reliability, price and convenient timetables. Should that be a condition of the bus service operators grant? When I ask my local authority for their performance stats on the 65 and other services, the operator is not obliged to produce them. How can we change the funding mechanisms that are there to improve the service?

Councillor Bryan: I get tired of hearing the words “commercially sensitive” when you try to get the information. It is not easy. Obviously, where we subsidise them we can get that information, but if it is a commercial route you cannot get the information. You do not know whether a bus company is making good profit out of a bus route that could help to run some of the other routes. They tend to just come to us for it.

One of the problems we have at the moment is that some of the money given to the bus companies is due to run out at the end of March. We still do not know whether it is going to be increased. That is a difficulty for the bus companies. My fear is that fairly soon, sometime during March—bearing in mind that it takes time to get a route stopped—they will start stopping routes if they do not see something for the future. This is worrying me. As I say, I only have 91 buses to start with. I do not want to lose any more of them.

Q59 **Grahame Morris:** Chris, perhaps I might ask you about the new guidance that is being issued in relation to bus service operators grant. The Government have indicated that the guidance will include more detail on what they are calling “socially necessary services”. In your opinion, what do you think socially necessary services should include?

Chris Hinchliff: That is a really important question. We have been waiting for that guidance for quite a long period of time. I hope it comes soon.

Q60 **Grahame Morris:** The standard reply is “Shortly.”

Chris Hinchliff: Socially necessary can cover a huge range of things. I believe the Government are looking more into what is economically necessary for thriving communities as well, in terms of supporting access to high street shopping and so on. It needs to go beyond quite limited understandings of whether you can access medical services. It needs to cover educational services for younger people. It needs to cover social opportunities, so that people can live a full and rich life whether or not they are living in a large town.



Q61 **Grahame Morris:** You mentioned integrated decision making, Andrew. Do you have a perspective on the reform of bus service operators grant?

Andrew Summers: I am not an expert on the operators grant. My view is about certainty—long-term certainty. In this whole thing, individuals are making decisions about how they travel. We are trying to get people away from the private car and on to other sustainable transport. That is never going to happen unless there is certainty about the other type of transport, otherwise you are always going to go to your private car.

As we have seen recently, even cuts in services or reductions in frequency shift people back to the private car. I am no expert on grants or whatever, but I think certainty needs to be provided to allow local authorities to provide the services required in the long run, and people making individual decisions. We all hear about people making individual decisions to achieve what they want in life and to be able to use transport that is low cost, low carbon and a shift away from the private car.

Chair: Thank you very much. I have allowed the discussion on buses to expand because it is such a critical part. However, I am conscious that at least one of our panellists needs to leave in the next 10 to 15 minutes, and we have other areas we want to cover this morning. I urge colleagues and witnesses to be as pithy as possible in your questions and answers. I would like to turn to rail services.

Q62 **Paul Howell:** We are talking about rail services in rural areas and what can be done to improve them. It depends on the area, and as an introduction, I have an area where the Leamside line is not there. We do not have a rural service in the first place, so there is a delivery that you need to get to first. I am going to ask you to talk about where there are existing services. We are not talking about building new railway lines. What can be done to improve rural rail services, and what barriers are faced in getting better service choice and frequency on the railways in your area?

Andrew Summers: We have a good example in our region. You may have heard of the East Suffolk line, which runs between Ipswich and Lowestoft. Recently Greater Anglia, the operator, was able to double frequency on that line to hourly, from every two hours. That led to a 200% increase in patronage. It serves a lot of rural villages along the route.

As you say, the ability to increase infrastructure provision is challenging at the current time, so it is about what more you can do with timetable changes and increasing frequency, making better use of what we have. We have two timetable changes each year. The next one comes up in May. There are opportunities within the existing rail network, if we are able to identify where some of those service enhancements would add to or increase patronage, to tackle them on a fairly short-term basis.

Q63 **Paul Howell:** We are trying to keep it tight, but would either of you like to add to that? I note what you said earlier, Ray, about the frequency of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

different things. I get frustrated down here, when they say that the tube is running late, but it is actually three minutes or something like that. We talk in hours. The delivery of a service needs to have consistency and reliability.

Councillor Bryan: That is absolutely essential if you want to encourage people to use it. It is also about the connectivity. We have a particular rail line that goes from Chris's area through to Bristol. If regularity on that was improved, you would find that people got into the habit of using it far more. If we can get people using it far more, that is better for the operators.

This is where we are missing a trick. We have to get connection working between buses, rail, cyclists and every form of transport that people use. We have to make it easy for them to get on to the public network. That is where they will save money and we might actually hit our carbon emissions target. I have said right from the word go that I have the responsibility of the climate and ecological emergency in Dorset. One of my biggest problems is going to be emissions from cars. We have to reduce cars and have more buses, but link the buses with rail. If I want to come here, I have a service every hour.

Chair: Can we have brief responses, please?

Mike Amesbury: I will leave it there, Chair, and let my colleague continue with this section.

Q64 **Chris Loder:** Ray, I am going to ask you a couple of questions. No offence, chaps, but we are up against the clock. We have mentioned the Heart of Wessex line and you referred to the Heart of Wessex line in terms of frequency. Has the council made representations to the local operator or the DFT in order to improve that line frequency?

Councillor Bryan: Continuously.

Q65 **Chris Loder:** Have they given you a reason as to why that is not the case?

Councillor Bryan: The answer we normally get is, "We'll come back to you with an answer." It is quite frustrating because the companies must be looking at what they need to do for the future. We want that shared with us, so that we can share our information with them. It is all about joined-up thinking between all the stakeholders to make sure we get it right.

Q66 **Chris Loder:** Given your experiences, do you have a belief that the Government do not take rural railway services as importantly as they should?

Councillor Bryan: I do, and I think it is evident that in rural areas train services are not as regular as in built-up areas.

Q67 **Chris Loder:** The Government have a number of targeted grants and different funding options, and competitions such as restoring your railway



and all these other things. In terms of the situation that you face, are they remotely helpful to you in being able to access cash to improve the service that you can provide, or can ask others to provide?

Councillor Bryan: I am currently working with the Western Gateway. I sit on that board, which is at the STB. We are working on putting papers forward on both public transport, which I lead on, and rail. There is a paper just about to come out, which I will forward to this Committee as soon as I receive it.

Q68 **Chris Loder:** The scheme that has been put forward—restoring your railway—is basically additional bits of infrastructure that are typically targeted to replace bits of track that were removed in the 1960s and 1970s. I think what you are saying is that that is not very helpful to you in providing a better frequency of service. Is that a fair assumption?

Councillor Bryan: That is very fair. In fairness, I do not think we are ever going to see the case where we can put the railway lines back down. On far too many occasions they have been built on.

Q69 **Chris Loder:** Network Rail did a Dorset connectivity study last year, in which they said they engaged with local stakeholders. Could you tell us your experience of that, and whether or not you were pleased and/or approved their outcome?

Councillor Bryan: Because I have to work with them in the future, I have to be gentle in how I say this. I do not think we got the responses we were looking for. I do not think we got the feedback we were looking for. They certainly did not listen to our proposals.

Q70 **Chris Loder:** In effect, the Dorset connectivity study that has been proposed is something that is not endorsed by Dorset Council as it stands.

Councillor Bryan: There were bits missed out that we felt should have been included.

Chair: Finally for this panel, Ruth has some questions. Again, I urge quick questions and answers.

Q71 **Ruth Cadbury:** We increasingly see new housing developments in rural areas that are very car-borne and cause congestion and other problems for nearby towns and public services. They are, of course, very isolating to those without access to a private car. What needs to change to ensure that new housing in rural areas is built in a way that counters that trend? Is it resources and expertise at local level, or is it national policies that are a problem? I will ask Chris in particular to answer.

Chris Hinchliff: I am not a planning expert, but we have many planning experts at CPRE. We can probably provide more detail than I am able to. The main thing I would point to is the importance of planning policies around the 15-minute neighbourhood, and ensuring that when new housing developments are designed they have within them the facilities



that people need to use on a daily basis, which therefore avoids the requirement for people to drive long distances in cars on a regular basis.

Councillor Bryan: We are currently going through our local plan, on which we have been negotiating with Michael Gove to get an extension. At the moment, the demand on us for extra housing is vast, at 30,000 houses over the next 10 years. I have already said that most of our area is one of outstanding national beauty, which means that those 30,000 houses have to go into areas that are already quite congested. You could say that is expansion of towns. Yes, I understand that, but we have to consider local people. They have bought houses in these areas and may not want to see them extended. It really is a balancing act.

I do not cover planning. From the things I see at the moment, and that are getting fed back to me, we are starting to get a response from Michael Gove's Department on ways forward where we can all work together, if that helps to answer the question for you.

Andrew Summers: I have a few things. There is the importance of neighbourhood plans and the role of the parish council in this space, determining through neighbourhood plans what is acceptable in a local area. For things such as active travel, there are local cycling and walking implementation plans identified. What is the network required in those areas?

There is also the principle of infrastructure first. It is ensuring that development can take place around infrastructure that is in there from day one. We have seen some great examples across England. The Huntingdon to Cambridge guided busway, for example, was implemented first and then development happened around it. Having that day one ability to travel sustainably is key.

Q72 **Ruth Cadbury:** I was going to move to active travel, so that I give Chris and Ray a chance to answer. Obviously, we are probably not talking active travel for 4 or 5 km and above on country lanes, but within villages and towns what can be done in rural areas to make it easier for people to walk and cycle to local amenities and nearby places a few miles away?

Councillor Bryan: To make that work you have to have safe ways of cycling or walking. We were quite lucky. We got some money from the transforming cities fund, which has enabled us to introduce a lot of new cycleways. There is a mixed reaction from the general public. A lot of the general public do not understand. They just think we are taking the roads away from them and trying to force them off the road. We have to find ways in which we can stop using the car for shorter journeys. Every time I say that, people say I am trying to drive them out of the car. I am not. We are trying to give them alternatives. That is working now.

Chris Hinchliff: I do not have too much to add. It is the importance of people feeling safe when they are making those journeys. That often involves providing them with a separate space, maybe footpaths



HOUSE OF COMMONS

alongside roads rather than expecting people to walk or cycle on small country lanes.

Andrew Summers: This is an area that our authorities are particularly passionate about. Active travel in rural areas is different from an urban area. The challenges are quite different. Through our survey, we know that speeding is a real issue, as well as pedestrian safety. How do you tackle those barriers?

Alongside an LCWIP for everywhere, basically, some of the things we are pushing forward are mini Hollands for market towns. In the east, Suffolk is pushing forward a mini Holland for Woodbridge. That is a transformation of that place to make it easier for people to walk and cycle.

One of the challenges is that investment in active travel in metropolitan areas will always have a better business case than in a rural area, so it is finding the opportunities. In places like the east, tourism is one of those. We have 140 million day trips and 10 million overnight trips. It is a huge economy for tourism. How can millions of people who come to our region experience active travel, for example for the first time, or continue it, and then go back to the urban areas they live in to continue that shift change? It also provides benefits for the communities.

It is about looking for opportunities to fund active travel, not just through traditional means but through section 106 tourism opportunities, and there are different ways of doing it in rural areas. Our authorities are really up for it.

Q73 **Ruth Cadbury:** Finally, we have some quite shocking evidence, for me as a Londoner, about children trying to do the school run of a few hundred yards getting in the car because of speeding along the lanes and through their villages. Often, as you say, there are no pavements. Do you think there should be a review of national speed limits on certain kinds of rural roads?

Councillor Bryan: We have just introduced a programme of 20 mph speed limits in certain areas. That is down to the local parish and town councils to apply for. We have received six applications in the last two months, so we will see what develops. In built-up areas, especially where there are schools, we have to start reducing the speed, which, again, will discourage people from using their cars.

Andrew Summers: Likewise, in London you have the Vision Zero approach. In our transport strategy, we have also adopted the Vision Zero approach. It is addressing speed, but also behaviour.

Q74 **Ruth Cadbury:** Vision Zero not being zero mph, but zero deaths by vehicle.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Andrew Summers: Yes, by vehicle; that is right. It is speed, but it is also behaviour and the design of the road layout, as well as the vehicles themselves. It is a systems approach to road safety.

Ruth Cadbury: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much for all your answers this morning and your offers of further information. We are very grateful.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Richard Stevens, Mark Hopwood and Graham Vidler.

Q75 **Chair:** For the purposes of our record, could the second panel briefly state their names and positions?

Graham Vidler: I am Graham Vidler, chief executive of the Confederation of Passenger Transport.

Richard Stevens: I am Richard Stevens, the managing director of Go South West, which operates 350 buses across Devon and Cornwall. My bus career started in 1989 in Penzance, and I have driven or operated pretty much every bus service between Bristol and Land's End in the last 30-odd years.

Mark Hopwood: I am Mark Hopwood, the managing director of Great Western Railway.

Q76 **Chair:** Thank you very much for your time this morning. Before we get into the specific issues of different modes of transport, looking at the service provision as a whole over the last decade, do you think the service has improved, got worse or stayed about the same in rural areas?

Graham Vidler: Perhaps I can speak first to the national picture for bus services. We have seen two periods in the level of bus provision. In the decade leading up to the pandemic, we saw local authority routes cut by about a half. That was a response to the difficult funding environment that local authorities were in at the time. Commercial services increased slightly over that period.

What we have seen since the pandemic started is the same pattern for local authority supported services. They have stayed fairly stable, but the mileage provided on commercial routes has been reduced. That has been done through a careful process, with operators working with their local authorities to decide where reductions are made that need to be made because of the funding pressures that the industry is under. We have had rural bus services reduced twice over that period, once because of the local authority funding and once because of the very profound consequences and changes of the pandemic.

Richard Stevens: I echo a lot of what Graham has just said. In my area I am blessed with some very proactive local authorities in Devon County Council and Cornwall County Council. Even there, we have seen some



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reductions in rural bus mileage. There is no doubt about it, the pandemic has given us a really tough time. Coming out of that, we are managing to operate 95% of the contracted network in Cornwall, as was anticipated pre-covid. In Plymouth, we are at around 80% and the rest of Devon is around 80% of where we would have been.

We are very excited about the national bus strategy. It sets out an opportunity for all of us and a focus so that we can address some of the decline that we have seen in rural areas over the years. I am looking forward to exploring your questions as we go through this morning.

Mark Hopwood: Over the last decade, which is what you asked about, the position for Great Western Railway has transformed. We have heard a number of positive references to Devon and Cornwall. We enjoy that relationship. Cornwall now has a half-hourly service on the mainline. That is a doubling of services. All the branch lines in Devon and Cornwall have the best timetable they have ever had in the history of Great Western Railway. A number of other routes have seen improvements as well, although I am sure we will be quizzed in a moment about some in particular.

We have also taken it a step further. The train is obviously important from our perspective, but integration with other transport is important. We have rolled out a concept called virtual branch lines. What we are now doing is working with people like Richard, and all the bus operators, to put together a package where the bus service and train service are much more closely integrated, both in physical interchange and in things like marketing, information and ticketing. We have launched the first of those already. We are seeing some great results. We opened a new railway to Okehampton in Devon. Everyone focused on the trains, which was great, but at the same time as we opened the railway we launched a new joint bus service, which was another virtual branch line that plugs in not just the people who can get to the station by walking but brings people in by bus.

All of those things have led to a transformation. My only nervousness is the degree of consistency. Our ability to work is reliant on local authorities that want to engage and put their money where their mouth is. We see some variations across the patch.

Q77 **Chair:** Thank you. I think I saw a picture of my predecessor as Chair waving off a train at Okehampton station.

Mark Hopwood: He seemed to enjoy it very much.

Chair: In a moment we will dig a little deeper into both buses and rail. At a more strategic level, Chris has a few questions.

Q78 **Chris Loder:** Good morning, gentlemen, it is good to see you, as always. Richard, do you have a view as to whether or not the role that central Government play in terms of planning for transport networks in rural areas is adequate or not at the moment, and whether it needs to be more



HOUSE OF COMMONS

or less?

Richard Stevens: In my experience, because nobody in the UK, outside travel to education or access to health, has a statutory right to access to transport, the role of local government in my life in shaping networks is really limited, beyond bidding for pots of money.

Q79 **Chris Loder:** I was meaning central Government rather than local government.

Richard Stevens: Sorry. I meant the Government as opposed to my local government. My life has been literally made up of working very closely with local authorities. That is where the influence around how network development occurs really takes place. I do not think that the Government have really played an active role in the involvement of networks in a place-based approach. That place shaping has come much more from local government.

Q80 **Chris Loder:** Do you have a view as to whether or not the Government should properly consider fully integrated bus and rail contracts for a specific area?

Richard Stevens: There are a lot of regulatory tools available to both local authorities and the Government as it stands at the moment. There are places whereby fully contracted models can work. We have put together the Transport for Cornwall project. It started out as One Public Transport System for Cornwall. We started working on it in 2015.

As Mark rightly points out, working with the railway, we have managed to do rail integration. We have managed to keep bus mileage in Cornwall at a pre-pandemic level. We have managed to connect most of the communities through the existing legislation that is available.

Q81 **Chris Loder:** Would you advocate, or not, a fully integrated bus and rail contract that the Government would let, maybe for local passenger transport?

Richard Stevens: I don't think I would. The reason is that I think all the tools already exist to achieve the outcomes.

Q82 **Chris Loder:** Thank you very much; message received.

Mark, can I ask you the same question as to your view on the role of central Government regarding planning and provision for rural areas? I was going to go on to ask you the same question about the fully integrated model.

Mark Hopwood: To keep it simple, it is a slightly tedious answer because I pretty much agree with what Richard said. We heard people in the previous panel talking about examples in western Europe and having a requirement to provide transport. Of course, there is no absolute base position, which I think is a weakness. We have done a lot of good work, and I have offered some examples, but it has largely been because people wanted to do it rather than because they had to do it.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Inevitably, there is always a lot of focus on structure and legislation, but you also have to think about the role of individual people, whether they are in the public or the private sector, and the degree of competence and enthusiasm they bring. A lot of the work we achieved in Cornwall was down to the competence and enthusiasm of a particular official in Cornwall who really wanted to make it happen, came to Westminster and made a sufficient nuisance of himself that things got approved and money was found.

Let's take the legislative position and the organisation position importantly, but you have to have people who want to make it happen. I have just found somebody in my business who is really keen on buses—some people are; he owns his own bus but he is now my integrated transport manager. He is absolutely committed to sorting out deals with Richard and other people. We have to focus very hard on that aspect as well, providing some leadership to make it happen.

I don't think I support having joint contracts. They may work in some areas. I know that they have granted them in places like the Netherlands. Certainly, my owning group, FirstGroup, probably has some competence to respond to that, but the requirements are probably quite different. The competencies are quite different. As Richard says, we actually have the framework to deliver a lot of the things that people want now. We just need to make sure that we have the money, the funding, the will and the leadership to make it happen.

Graham Vidler: There is a greater role that central Government could take in defining the minimum standards that people can expect. At the moment, we have an absence of that. There was a rural transport strategy that was consulted on about 18 months ago. There was also a reference in the national bus strategy to clearer definition of socially and economically necessary services. Both those strands of work need completion. I do not think it follows from that that central Government should get involved, for example, in designing networks or setting contracts. I think the existing relationships between operators and local authorities are the appropriate place to take forward delivery of the minimum standards.

Q83 **Chris Loder:** Thanks very much. What about the fully integrated contract model? Are you pro or con?

Richard Stevens: I would include that with the second part of my answer; I do not think it is necessary for central Government to do that.

Q84 **Chris Loder:** You are against it.

Richard Stevens: Yes.

Chair: I want to turn now to buses. Mike will lead us off on this section.

Q85 **Mike Amesbury:** Good morning, gentlemen. Mark, what role do bus operators have in ensuring that people in rural communities have



adequate public transport? When it comes to making a decision about the withdrawal of services, is commercial viability the only driver?

Mark Hopwood: I am a train operator. We work very closely with bus operators, but I am not really involved in looking at some of those matters. Our focus on working with bus operators has been trying to maximise the advantage where they currently have networks that can be tweaked to serve stations. Our story across most of our patch, fortunately, has been one of improvement than retrenchment. The bus operators would have to respond to the issues that they face in those circumstances.

Q86 **Mike Amesbury:** You spoke about good co-operation between yourselves and the local bus operators. You have interdependency. If there is a decision to withdraw services, is that a channel for effective communication that you have in the patch?

Mark Hopwood: Obviously, one has to be careful about things like the CMA provisions. I mentioned a few minutes ago the opening of the railway to Okehampton. That has led to a review both by the bus operators and by Devon Council about the shape of the bus network. What they have decided is that some bus routes would be better being moved to serve Okehampton and for passengers to continue to Exeter on the train, rather than have all the buses continuing to run to Exeter. It is important that we try to look at these things holistically and jointly. I made a specific point earlier of saying that one of the great successes about Okehampton is not just the fact that we have opened what I have to say is the only railway line in the country under restoring your railways. When we did it, we also made sure that the bus services were improved at the same time.

Richard Stevens: It is a good question. The answer is that we take into account a realm of factors when we consider network design. I am a busman. I want to run buses. The last thing I want to do is take them out. I want to put them in. I want to double the number of buses running across Devon and Cornwall, not reduce the number. Patently, we have to make a return on our investment. When I mobilised the Cornwall contract, which required 150 buses to be provisioned within nine weeks, my company invested over £20 million in Euro 6-compliant vehicles. That is a massive commitment to what is a rural network. In fact, I need it to succeed, otherwise I won't have a job.

We did some reshaping of the network towards the end of last year. We managed to keep the lines on the map, but there has to be creativity around how we make the networks function. As part of that, we have worked heavily to integrate school transport, statutory school movements, in the bus network so that the school movements help to contribute, to give rural connectivity in the off-peak and around those school movements. We managed to integrate over 120 school contracts in that network, which is now helping to support the bus network.



The answer to your question is that we take into account a range of factors. Money is one of them, but it is also how you maintain a network provision; otherwise it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of cuts if you just go service by service. It is a network approach to decision making.

Graham Vidler: Of course, what Richard relates in his experience in the south-west is what has been happening nationally as well. Across the country, bus operators have been specifically working with local authorities. We did a programme of sustainability reviews last autumn, which looked not just at individual routes but at the network as a whole. It looked not just at commercial viability but at the needs and preferences of local communities and local stakeholders. That did not mean that we could keep every single service going that previously went; far from it. The changes that have taken place since the pandemic are so profound that we cannot do that, but it means that we took into account, as far as we could, other considerations beyond commercial viability.

Q87 **Mike Amesbury:** What is the panel's view of the bus service operators grant and those reforms? Can we start with Graham and then Richard?

Graham Vidler: As we understand the Government's plans from the national bus strategy, they want to transition bus service operators grant to a per kilometre basis as opposed to a per litre of fuel basis. The immediate impact of that will be to favour bus services that operate in rural areas over bus services that operate in urban areas. That may well be a transition that Government decide they want to make. We are urging them to protect the losers in that transition, who will be passengers on urban bus services.

The same transition was made in Scotland a decade or so ago. There would have been very profound cuts to urban services at that time, or increases in urban fares, if the Scottish Government had not put in place a damping mechanism so that the losses in urban areas were protected. It is very important that we do the same if the Government decide to make the change in England.

Richard Stevens: The bus service operators grant is an imperative if we are to protect and grow bus services. At the moment, bus recovery grant discussions are taking place with the DFT about the cliff edge, with the bus recovery grant due to end in March. We need to secure an outcome from that. The bus service operators grant is being talked about as a potential mechanism for how we might continue to protect and grow bus services across the UK.

Graham has outlined the potential impact of swapping over from a litres to a kilometres-based approach. There are potential consequences in an urban setting. We need to make sure that they are not detrimental to others that rely on those services. In a rural setting, where there are generally higher mileage services, there should be an opportunity to enhance provision. If we get security of funding and the appropriate measures are put in place, the bus service operators grant is a



sophisticated tool to help protect services for passengers, and to grow those opportunities in a rural setting. It is a good idea.

Q88 Grahame Morris: I think you were present for the first panel's evidence. To follow up Councillor Bryan's comment about trying to encourage people to make a conscious switch, whether that is for financial reasons, zero carbon target reasons or whatever, what is the impact of the £2 fare cap in encouraging greater bus ridership? Richard? He is a bus operator, but I will come to you next, Graham.

Richard Stevens: As you heard before, it is early days. As operators, we were really excited about the scheme. It is good for passengers, inasmuch as it helps them with the cost of living crisis. In terms of its ability to generate modal shift, three months is not long enough, in my opinion, to achieve modal shift.

What has happened in my own company is that it is not actually at this stage growing additional passengers. The take-up of singles sold has risen by 4.1 percentage points. The actual share of tickets purchased on singles on the £2 fare has increased, but that has been from channel swapping away from weekly and monthly tickets. People have basically moved to the best value fare. It will be interesting to see what the legacy is.

As operators, we are concerned about the scheme when it gets to its end. Obviously, the scheme will end, and people will have to go back to the previous fare. That is going to have an impact. In Cornwall, we were already running a low bus fares pilot, where we received DFT funding to test the hypothesis that price is a barrier to modal shift in a rural setting. That has been running for just over a year. Typically, we lowered fares around 30% from what they were. The buying power of that scheme has now been reduced by inflation by 25%, but even so it is generating passenger growth.

Q89 Grahame Morris: What is your conclusion from the pilot? Did it encourage modal shift?

Richard Stevens: Which one are you talking about? The £2 fare or the low fare pilot?

Grahame Morris: The low fare pilot.

Richard Stevens: The low fare pilot is achieving passenger growth. At the moment, we are looking at 15% year on year. In the summer season, when tourists visit the south-west, there is another 15% on that. We are seeing 30% in peak summer.

Q90 Grahame Morris: Do you take the point that was made in the previous panel that it is not just the fare? It is a significant factor, but there is also reliability and having a clean bus. It is having confidence that when you go for the bus in the freezing cold, you are not going to have to wait 55 minutes or an hour and 55 minutes for the next one.



Richard Stevens: I totally agree with you. I don't think price is the primary barrier to modal shift. When I talk to passengers, they want all the things you say: reliability, a clean bus, punctuality, frequency and that it goes where they want it to go. One of the biggest things that you see happening is the frustration of people, particularly those on the English national concession scheme who are not making a payment themselves—it is being made on their behalf through reimbursement—who say, "What's the point in giving me a free bus pass if you don't give me a bus to travel on?" People are happy to pay a contribution for good service. It is the link with making sure that we are reliable and offer good value for money.

The growth of Cornwall passenger numbers is not just attributable to the low fares pilot. It is about connectivity. It is about integration with rail. It is about an interoperable, multi-operator ticket with no price premium, with a standardised product suite and standardised pricing across all bus operators. That is helping to drive passenger growth, and passenger growth among young people. They are the acquirers. That is where we can win hearts and minds; 95% of my young people are back at pre-covid levels. I have almost forgotten your question. I am on one, so I will stop and let you re-ask your question.

Q91 **Grahame Morris:** Essentially, it was about the impact of the £2 fare cap and other initiatives to reduce fares temporarily. Does that have a longer-term impact? Are there other factors like having wi-fi on buses, particularly for longer journeys, in attracting younger people?

Richard Stevens: I think the wi-fi element has dropped out, to take your last point first. Most people have access to it, so we find there is less call for wi-fi as a provision. There is more call to keep MyBus. If we get the basics right, that helps it to work. We do not have a joined-up policy that encourages people to modal shift. I have been chasing this for 30 years. It is like the holy grail.

Q92 **Grahame Morris:** Is it a consequence of the fragmented system we have with private operators?

Richard Stevens: I do not think it is. People far cleverer than me designed the deregulation of the late 1980s. I joined at that point. Better people than me made decisions that are outside my control.

Q93 **Grahame Morris:** Do you think that the bus service is far better in London, where it is regulated?

Richard Stevens: No, I don't. If you look at the London example at the moment, it is in decline as well. It has been held up as a beacon, but it has its own challenges. It too has its back against the wall at the moment. Some of that is through the pandemic, but some of it was prior to the pandemic. I think they do a really good job through Transport for London. That is why we called Transport for Cornwall Transport for Cornwall. We aspired to match it. I do not think that the regulatory environment of London was a precursor for achieving it in Cornwall. We



have done it in Cornwall without a regulatory environment because it is done through partnership.

I heard people earlier on saying, "We can't get access to commercial information." I work with an open book with my local authority. They have access to my information. We just signed a confidentiality agreement. It is really straightforward. They have access to the same materials. All of our planning meetings about services and route changes are done in the same room.

Q94 **Grahame Morris:** Perhaps you might have a word about that with your oppo in Go North East. Graham, can I ask you a similar question? There have been other schemes, haven't there? For example, in Greater Manchester, there was a discounted scheme. Was there positive feedback from that in encouraging modal shift?

Graham Vidler: There is a variety of schemes at the moment. There is the national three-month £2 fare cap. There are—

Q95 **Grahame Morris:** It was going to be a year originally, wasn't it? That was my understanding.

Graham Vidler: I believe it was, yes, when Grant Shapps first mooted it. There are also longer-lasting schemes in West Yorkshire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside.

If we take the national fare cap scheme first, the primary intention of that is to support people during the cost of living challenges of this winter. It is clearly doing that. It will particularly be doing that in rural areas where fares tend to be higher because they are longer journeys. People will benefit particularly strongly from that.

I have not seen any evidence yet that that, or the other fare schemes, is having a material impact on passenger numbers, or indeed modal shift. To build on something Richard said, I think the key drivers of bus usage, and therefore modal shift, are clear if you look at years and years of Transport Focus research. For example, is there a bus service at all? How frequent is it and how quick and reliable is it? Those are the three things. Price is important, but those are the three things that drive change.

We will see areas that, through the national bus strategy and investment in bus service improvement plans, can deliver on all those fronts. We will see growth in those areas. Fares alone will not do it.

Q96 **Grahame Morris:** On that same idea, what can we learn from what has happened in the pandemic and the application of passenger response to services or new apps? Are there any schemes operating? I think we looked at one in Liverpool when we were doing the inquiry into deregulated bus services outside London. Are there any positive lessons that operators are learning that might improve the service to the passenger and increase bus ridership?



Graham Vidler: The lesson I focus on is quite a dull regulatory one, I am afraid. It is about the extent to which operators and local authorities have worked in partnership. The pandemic coincided with the creation of enhanced partnerships in almost every part of the country. Even without the enhanced partnership wrapper, I saw a degree of joint working and acceptance of the joint challenge of getting people where they want to go that is probably unprecedented in decades in the bus industry. It is a really helpful development and something we can build on for the future.

Mark Hopwood: From my perspective, we have been working to support the £2 bus fare as well. We have had posters, social media and stuff that is visible to people using the train. I mentioned the virtual branch lines, but in answer to your question about what we can do, there is the work that we have been doing ourselves, that local authorities have done, and the bus companies. We have seen a 35% increase in patronage of those bus routes. If you take the Okehampton example in isolation, because it is a completely new train service, the figure is 68%. Those are quite impressive results, and we obviously want to build on them.

Q97 **Grahame Morris:** I think there is a lesson about integration and joint working. I am just thinking about last Sunday when Sunderland played Middlesbrough at home—Sunderland won 2-0 incidentally. The train operator, Northern, put on an additional train, which I thought was brilliant, and they then decided it would not stop at Horden or Seaham. People were getting the bus to the train station thinking it would be marvellous. There cannot have been any discussions with the bus operators about integrated passenger movements. I do not know whether those conversations take place on an organised, regular basis or if it is just ad hoc. Perhaps it is different in different parts of the country.

Mark Hopwood: It is obviously difficult to talk about parts of the network for which I am not responsible. Certainly in our patch, we have those conversations, not just with the operators but with the event organisers themselves. As an example, there is a new stadium proposed to be built on the north side of Bristol. One of the key things that we are talking about with Network Rail, the stadium and other transport operators is making sure that we have enough capacity so that if there is a music concert that finishes at half past 10 at night, and 17,000 people appear, we can move those people. I have examples on my patch of that happening, and I think it is important.

Q98 **Grahame Morris:** Is it wired in particularly for events in the south-west? Do you have a kind of gold command discussion with the bus companies?

Mark Hopwood: I would not necessarily use as grand a title as that, but we certainly have high-quality conversations. We have events in Cornwall, for example in the summer with Boardmasters, where we have to adjust the transport plan to fit. Generally, we have been successful. Of course, we would always like to do more. One of the things about investment in new sporting facilities and new concert venues—a bit like



HOUSE OF COMMONS

new housing—is trying to make sure that the investment in the venue is supported by investment in the transport infrastructure.

Grahame Morris: I had better hand back because of the time.

Richard Stevens: Can I take you back to your question about what else we have learnt? The other thing that has come out for operators and for local authorities is that we have become much smarter on data about what we know. We are much more demand-led than perhaps we have ever been, in my experience. That is demand both in terms of the road-working environment—in other words, managing congestion—and in managing capacity and demand in passenger numbers.

As the networks leaned down during covid, we had to do that very quickly. Coming back the other way and bringing the networks back as the Government support leant in, it was very important that we looked after key workers. It was very important that we supported education, access to health and all those kinds of things. The lessons we learnt then are probably some of the biggest that will present a benefit to us going forward, as we design a better public transport network in the future. We had intensive learning through the pressure of covid about how we use data, and share it with the passenger. On my app, you can see all operators, watch your bus go around and see where it is.

Q99 **Grahame Morris:** I think there is a fault with that because I have tried to use it for the 65. I think there is a ghost bus that appears to be coming and then never arrives, unless it is re-routed.

On data sharing, going back to the old-fashioned method, does Go South West do regular passenger surveys to ask what they think of the service? When I ask Go North East, they talk about public consultations, but nobody bothers apart from me and a few other people. I don't know whether they are frightened to ask the question. I think they would get a shock with the response on what passengers think about the service.

Richard Stevens: Go Ahead and Go South West add financially to the Passenger Focus surveys that take place. We also do our own surveys. I have what I call a chatabus, which is a community vehicle. We go out and sit in town centres, villages and bus shelters. We talk to people about the bus service, what we've got, the challenges they've got and what we are trying to do. I still drive buses, so that is my best litmus test for hearing what people are saying about buses and bus transport. The deeper connected you get to it, the more chance you have of actually delivering on the needs of people rather than doing it to them.

Q100 **Grahame Morris:** You have never mentioned the availability of drivers, which was something that was brought up previously, and how difficult sometimes it is to attract drivers to provide the service, even when the funding is there.

Richard Stevens: That has been a challenge. It certainly was a challenge in my organisation leading up to September. It has stabilised



now. I had over 100 applicants over the Christmas period. I have more applicants than I have vacancies. My organisation is just about at full establishment now. That is really pleasing because we are delivering a much more reliable service than we were in the autumn last year. The driver shortage had so many component parts. It was not a simple fix, but I think it is fair to say that the recruitment element of the crisis is coming to an end. The next challenge is how we convert those applicants into new bus drivers. I think the market for existing bus drivers has stabilised and people are sitting tight in their job.

Q101 Greg Smith: I want to move us specifically to rail. We may have covered some of the ground in some of the answers that came out in the last set of questions around integration and so on. Mark, particularly in terms of the train operating companies—yours and others—what role do you have to ensure that rural communities are adequately provided for?

Mark Hopwood: We have some different roles. First of all, whatever is written in our contract has to be provided. There is a base level of service provision. We have heard about punctuality and reliability. That is tremendously important. We need to deliver what we have said we will deliver as part of the base provision.

Of course, not everyone likes what the base position is. There is then an obligation on us, I think, to engage with a variety of people such as local authorities and the other sub-national transport groups who were sat here earlier. Sometimes there are representatives of the business communities and other people who potentially want to express a view, as well as people who potentially have funding. We need to deliver the improvements that those people can either fund themselves, which in some cases they have, or that they are able to persuade central Government to fund. I have given some examples this morning of where we have been doing that, and no doubt there are others.

Q102 Greg Smith: Can we switch the focus a little bit to how the adequacy of a service, particularly to rural communities, small market towns and villages, is assessed? How do you go about analysis of what the best frequency is and how many seats should be available on a particular service, or how long a journey time should realistically be from a small market town to the nearest city?

Mark Hopwood: If we are honest, we do not start off with a blank sheet of paper at each timetable. If we are honest, there is a degree of historical inheritance; people have the railway lines they've got and they have a service. It is quite difficult sometimes to restructure timetables in a way that involves having winners and losers, because the winners are very happy to take their improvements and people are reluctant to see anything reduced.

For example, journey times are generally a reflection of the capability of the infrastructure. I was recently in Devon talking to a number of stakeholders who represent people who use the line to Barnstaple. That



journey time is about an hour. That is a lot longer than people would like because we have to stop to collect single-line tokens. Even in 2023 we are still handing drivers pieces of metal in a Victorian signalling system. We also have to operate the level crossing barriers ourselves with our own staff, so the train has to stop, that has to happen and the train proceeds. Clearly, with investment you could reduce the journey time by eliminating those tasks.

In terms of capacity, to some extent these things are self-evident. Trains have got busier and busier. If you take what we call the Devon Metro, which in some cases is not very metro but quite rural, and services out from Exeter, we have seen over the last decade continuous growth. We have had to keep finding ways of securing more rolling stock. What was a two-car network is now generally a four-car network.

That work obviously reflects growing customer demand. We have also got better at understanding where future demand is coming from. We know where housing is being built. We have driven some of the demand ourselves, of course, because we are building new stations. On Great Western, there are more new stations being built than on any other part of the network at the moment. That is important. People want to see that, but we also have to make sure, as we put down the station infrastructure, that we are supporting it with the train service.

Q103 Greg Smith: Do you have incentives in your contract to meet not necessarily the obvious—running trains—but to ensure that the customer experience is where you realistically want it to be, where someone turning up at a station has a realistic expectation of being able to sit down on that service rather than standing for an hour, or whatever it might be? Is it within the scope of your clearly expanding services, and going from two to four cars, and so on, and just getting on with it?

Mark Hopwood: In the current contract, there are probably three areas. One is that part of the incentive regime that determines what we get paid is around our ability to deliver the train service, not just in terms of cancelled trains and punctuality but capacity and what we call short formations. If we do not deliver the capacity, we are penalised. Secondly, there is a service quality regime, which looks at the more general customer experience, and whether people are experiencing a journey that is in line with what we have set out to do.

Then there is a review of how we are managing the business and how we are engaging with other people, which is called the measure of good and efficient operator. If we are not responding to stakeholder feedback and if we are not engaging with people like local authorities and user groups, we get penalised there.

Q104 Greg Smith: Richard, you wanted to come in.

Richard Stevens: Yes, I did. You might think, "Well, what does a bus person think about the rail question you asked?" From 2014 to last year,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I was the chair of the Peninsula Rail Task Force in the south-west, post the Dawlish rail line crashing out, so I have a deep interest in this as well, from a regional connectivity piece.

The work that Mark and GWR have done is really good. Having a doubling of the main line frequency in Cornwall is great and I fully support it, so I do not want what I am about to say come out as negative. There were very strong commercial bus flows connecting some of those towns. The provision of the railway is very attractive for people who want to go straight from A to B, but for those who live in the conurbations in between you still need buses. Of course, the buses have seen some erosion of their passengers because of the opportunity to travel on a better railway.

I think your question was about how railways help a rural setting and transport. They definitely do, but we need a holistic approach, to make sure that how we build the Devon Metro and how we do the Cornwall branch line projects and everything else can take the buses with them. It needs more than just the attitude, "What can the bus operators and rail operators do?" It needs local authorities to really grip their parking policies. It needs the building of new towns and estates that really think about access and egress, so that we come to a full transport solution which encourages people to use both the bus and the train. That also goes for demand responsive and hub and spoke, which we have heard a lot about today.

The problem with hub and spoke and interconnectivity is the time taken. We are all in the business of providing travel time to people. We want to facilitate their lives to get from where they are to where they want to go. The more incidents of friction you put into the system, the less attractive a proposition it is against the car. The point I am making, to go back to the question about what Government can do, is that it needs the national transport strategies that we have to be brought to life, with some cohesion of the different policy strands to drive some energy into it, to achieve modal shift. We will not do it in isolation.

Q105 **Greg Smith:** I accept that. With the clock ticking, I will throw in one last question off the back of what you said. In the debate between rail, car and bus, do you think more people would get on the train if the price to park their car at the train station was not almost as punitive as the ticket itself?

Mark Hopwood: I am not aware of any examples where the car park price sits in that area in my patch. Generally, certainly pre-pandemic, the problem we had at most station car parks was that they were full, not that they were acting as a disincentive for people to travel. The position has obviously changed a little bit with the pandemic.

Certainly in my business, there has been an awful lot of investment in new car parking over the last decade. The expectation of DFT and Government is that if we build car parking we recover the cost through



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the revenue line. We recognise that ultimately rail has to be attractive. Certainly, pre-pandemic, we were seeing very strong levels of growth year on year. Even with the pandemic, to go back to the Devon Metro, they have recovered all the business they lost in the pandemic. They are above the pandemic levels. There is no evidence that people are being discouraged from coming to rail by that.

Richard Stevens: As a group and as a company we are interested in mobility hubs and how we bring together the different touch points of the different modes of travel, whether it be walking, cycling, electric cars, GoBikes or trains. The work that we have been doing on enhancing the interchange experience removes the barriers for the desirability of the train or the bus. We have some money through transforming cities, in Plymouth in particular, to put in mobility hubs with electric bikes and access to railway stations that are less used. Devonport is an example on the outskirts of Plymouth. It is a very deprived ward within the city. I think that interchange mode will generate modal shift. We are doing that in various settings across Devon and Cornwall.

Q106 **Greg Smith:** Graham, is there anything you want to add on this?

Graham Vidler: I have nothing to add on that specific question.

Q107 **Chair:** Thank you very much for your time. I am conscious of the clock, but I would like to conclude with one final question. Would you give quickfire answers to it? We understand that the Secretary of State will be making his announcement on the future of rail reform in the Bradshaw lecture in a couple of weeks' time. In terms of your ability to help plan for public transport to rural areas, what do you hope he will say?

Mark Hopwood: I hope we will end the uncertainty that the industry has had for too long about how it should be structured and how it will work. We should look at best practice, some of which I have tried to offer. Other people will have their own examples. Maybe the best practice needs to become less optional and more mandatory across the country. There are some clear lessons from how we have delivered success. We should make sure we have the right framework to keep doing that, and do more of it.

Richard Stevens: I cannot add to that.

Graham Vidler: And I don't represent the rail industry.

Chair: We await with bated breath what is said. Thank you for your time. It has been a really interesting discussion and it has highlighted a number of areas that I am sure we will want to continue discussing in the future. For now, thank you again.