



Transport Committee

Oral evidence: [Buses connecting communities](#), HC 494

Wednesday 26 March 2025

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Ruth Cadbury (Chair); Steff Aquarone; Dr Scott Arthur; Catherine Atkinson; Olly Glover; Katie Lam; Alex Mayer; Baggy Shanker; Rebecca Smith.

Questions 171–204

Witnesses

II: Naomi Green, Managing Director, England's Economic Heartland; Alistair Hands, Managing Director of Regions, Arriva Group; Miriam Binsztok, Transport Co-ordination Services Manager, Cornwall Council; Damien Jones, Representative, Local Government Association, and Deputy Director for Transport Operations, Devon County Council.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [England's Economic Heartland](#)
- [Arriva Group](#)
- [Cornwall Council](#)
- [Local Government Association](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Naomi Green, Alistair Hands, Miriam Binsztok and Damien Jones.

Q171 **Chair:** I would like to welcome everyone to our second panel. Could I ask you to introduce yourselves?

Damien Jones: Hello, I am Damien Jones. I am representing the LGA, but I am deputy director for transport, environment and waste at Devon County Council. I am also national chair for the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers.

Alistair Hands: I am Alistair Hands. I am the managing director for UK bus regions at Arriva.

Naomi Green: I am Naomi Green, managing director of England's Economic Heartland, a sub-national transport body.

Miriam Binsztok: Good morning. I am Miriam Binsztok. I am the transport co-ordination service manager for Cornwall Council. I am here representing Cornwall Council and our Transport for Cornwall partnership.

Q172 **Chair:** What are the main advantages of the enhanced partnership model as a framework for improving local bus services?

Damien Jones: Talking from Devon's experience and from the experience of other local authorities that I represent, the enhanced partnership model has brought colleagues closer together. It has formed better operating relationships with local bus companies. Within councils, it has meant we have a better working relationship particularly with highways in terms of how we are managing the network to impact on buses and how we can make improvements.

It can be a little bit of a struggle with the utility works that take place, but it has improved the relationship and how we respond to day-to-day events on the network. It has also meant we have good feedback from various partners into the partnership. We have different groups represented. We have people who are accessing education and healthcare. All those kinds of bodies are included in it. It has been a really positive experience.

Alistair Hands: From my perspective, it is the requirement for the bus service improvement plan. The enhanced partnership is a formal arrangement to bring together operators and the local authority, but it is really important to have a considered plan around the outcomes for the travelling public that sits at the heart of that. It is about bringing together the things that the local authority can do in terms of transport bus prioritisation and what operators can bring to that in terms of commercial operation and innovation. Bringing those together but starting fundamentally with that bus service improvement plan is really important.



Naomi Green: It is the most light-touch way of moving forward with a pathway for gradual improvements. From a revenue risk perspective, it keeps the revenue risk with the operators, but there is a shared reputational risk. Where enhanced partnerships are most effective is where they have really strong local political leadership. I am sure we will come on to the fact that the most effective ones are where there is more funding.

Miriam Binsztok: Similar to what others have said today, the enhanced partnership is really the framework or document that enables us to all come together and articulate a shared vision and shared objectives for what we want to achieve for transport, and especially transport in Cornwall.

For us, our journey towards a partnership started in 2015-16. We started with the idea of One Public Transport System for Cornwall. Shortly afterwards, we had a mass retender of our network where we have our colleagues from Go Cornwall Bus. From 2020 onward, we were able to start with the idea of working in partnership and articulating to the public what we wanted for that ground of transport for Cornwall. We were in a really good position to bring all this to the table. That is one of the greatest benefits of the enhanced partnership.

Q173 **Chair:** Are there limitations with the enhanced partnership model that make it less effective than the franchising model in delivering improvement in buses?

Miriam Binsztok: From a local authority point of view, what is lacking in an enhanced partnership is operational accountability. It is not a legally enforceable document.

One of the great things we do in Cornwall is the integration of our network. Gem and her team are doing an absolutely cracking job trying to integrate the whole network change. We have fares and roadside information, et cetera. Getting all the parties aligned in that project plan is really important. When we have an activity slipping here, something else slipping there or a deadline that is not met, it compromises the whole critical path. From an operational point of view, not having that ability to enforce key operational agreements and commitments makes the enhanced partnership a goodwill document.

From an operator point of view—Alistair, you can correct me—I feel it is really good for them to be able to articulate to the group, to their shareholders and to the executive board, “This is a commitment that we have made at a local level. This is linked to funding or is enforceable”. They can give everyone clarity about the expectations, but it is left to them to make things happen.

Alistair Hands: From my perspective, they are only as good as their constituent parts. It needs a good-quality plan and really true collaboration between the local authority and the operators.



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Touching on the point around operational performance, it is in everybody's interest for there to be strong operational delivery on the ground because that is what ultimately generates patronage. That works.

The other piece would be that it does not give the local authority direct control over price and route, but it does come with the attractions of being relatively quick, requiring relatively low investment, and being able to get to the delivery of benefits sooner.

Naomi Green: Can I just add a couple of points to that? In the EEH region, we have 104 bus operators operating across the 12 authorities in our partnership. Bus operators do not have to join EPs. The Committee was probing earlier about the major operators. It is often really hard to get small operators to commit the time to shape and influence what those EPs need to look like.

The other thing, based on that, is the amount of time it takes to build those really strong relationships. That is the same with franchising, but it is probably easier to dip in and out of an EP unless you have that strong political leadership. That is a big risk for them. When it comes to capacity and capability in the local authorities, it is much harder to keep these going unless you have a strong commitment to do so.

Damien Jones: It is also down to strong relationships as well. That is quite key. If take into account the money that the council might be putting in for local schoolchildren or the national bus pass funding, even on a commercial network councils are putting in quite a lot of money to be able to influence how it operates.

Q174 **Katie Lam:** We have heard in a few sessions over the weeks about the challenges of planning effectively in the current funding timeframe context. How does the lack of a multi-year funding stream affect the ability of enhanced partnerships to deliver long-term improvements?

Miriam Binsztok: From a local authority perspective, for a whole partnership, you need to have certainty of return on investment and the ability to plan ahead. The environment at the moment is quite financially risky because there are so many uncertainties. Long-term funding gives everyone certainty about what they are going to be investing and what the potential return is and the ability to plan in advance over the long term.

However, it has to be acknowledged that for rural local authorities the funding is going to have a different benefit ratio. In Cornwall, we already subsidise over 50% of the network. The council has made a strong commitment to public transport through our eight-year contract with Go Cornwall Bus. Even though we have that long-term commitment and a long-term line in the budget, it is still very challenging.

I am going to kick myself if I do not mention one of the reports that we had from our colleagues from CPT. They did a great report around the



return on investment on local bus services. That report said that the return on every £1 invested in local bus services is £4.55. We need to change the mentality when we are talking about long-term funding. As public officers, we are investing into the public purse. We are going to be reducing the social care bill. We are going to be maximising social mobility, access to education and employment. The industry as a whole also generates a lot of money. Framing that long-term settlement as a long-term investment gives everyone more levers and a greater ability to use that money for the best.

Q175 **Alex Mayer:** How successful have enhanced partnerships been in improving bus services outside of major urban centres? We are not necessarily just talking about very rural areas; we are also talking about your average market town.

Naomi Green: It is hugely varied. In some locations within the EEH region such as Hertfordshire, where we had a long commitment to a partnership that became an enhanced partnership, we are currently seeing 95% reliability rates and 18% year-on-year growth. Those are rarities rather than the norm.

Where enhanced partnerships are particularly successful in the EEH region are where we have really good infrastructure, such as the guided Luton-Dunstable Busway. Some 20% of all the trips between those two places are by bus. That is unbelievably high. There is a 10% year-on-year growth in patronage on the busway. That has a specific reason: it is reliable and it is quicker than the car. It is those conditions that make them successful.

Just coming back to the previous question about long-term funding, it is about being able to plan a reliable network and be responsive to where there is a need for improved reliability. That can only be achieved if you have funding over a longer period of time.

Q176 **Chair:** I am just going to slot in a question that I asked the previous panel about demand-responsive transport. What is your relationship with DRT? What are the opportunities and challenges?

Damien Jones: We cover a large rural area, as many councils do. A lot of DRT has been developed, but it requires a significant amount of funding. In Devon, we have tried a different model that is based around taxis. We have a fare car scheme. If we have buses that have very low numbers, we can use those cars to take people to points where they can use other forms of transport or we can take them to their destination. The model of DRT that is now available in a lot of areas does require significant funding. We are trying a different way of doing it in Devon.

Alistair Hands: We have operated significant DRT services. I would echo the point that, on a standalone commercial basis, it is really challenging. If you look at it in terms of the wider place-based economics that we talked about earlier, it can be a way of delivering a service for a lower



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cost per kilometre over a wider area. It is important to be able to join up the demand streams of commercial customers, education and non-emergency patient transport to make it really work.

Damien Jones: We also need to look at the total transport concept in rural areas so we can manage the network for passengers. We manage non-emergency patient transport alongside school and public transport. You need to get that integration of journeys. There are lots of journeys that take place that are not necessarily planned together. It is about trying to bring that together as well to get the best access in rural areas.

Naomi Green: As an STB, we have been asked by our authorities to look at total transport. It is a huge pressure on local authorities, as you will well know. Looking at transport in its entirety, both in terms of home-to-school transport and public transport, is a really big opportunity. We think data and innovation can do a huge amount to move that forward.

Just coming back to DRT, there are examples, such as Milton Keynes, where DRT can bring down the cost of subsidised services. It is proving really effective. We have also done some really important work around mobility hubs, which I know you were talking about earlier, and the role of DRT in servicing high-frequency corridors. You can break it up that way.

Q177 **Dr Arthur:** In the last session we heard a little bit about transport integration. Whenever you get transport people together, they talk about integration. Talk is cheap, is it not? Do enhanced partnerships make integration easier between travel modes?

Alistair Hands: There is a great example in our network in Leighton Buzzard. In conjunction with Bedford Council, we have invested in new vehicles. We collaborated with them to reshape the tendered network and integrate the timetable with local rail services. They absolutely can make it easier in the right places.

Damien Jones: Rail operators are part of a lot of enhanced partnerships. In the south-west, Great Western sits on the enhanced partnership. We can look at how to integrate between the modes with bus links that connect with the trains and then go into rural areas.

Q178 **Dr Arthur:** Rail and bus is good, but what about active travel links, particularly in terms of cycle networks? Is that something?

Miriam Binsztok: With regard to integration in Cornwall, we are doing a really good job not only on integrating the whole network but also with our collateral interventions, such as interoperability. We have a policy, "Any ticket, any bus". You can buy any ticket in Cornwall and use it on any of our buses, as the name says. We have standardised the fares as well. When we talk about integration, there is a whole piece that is not only about the transport mode but how we can make it really easy, similar to what we have here in London.



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We have a really good relationship with our colleagues from GWR in rail and we are trying as much as we can to integrate modes. In Cornwall, there is a challenge around home-to-school transport. This point was brought up in the previous session. We integrate a lot of school movements into our public transport network because it is better for the student and it is better for our budget. That creates some limitations on how flexible we can be with our network when we are trying to align with rail timetables.

On active travel, following the restructuring of the council, the transport strategy team sits on the same team as public transport. We are headed by a really amazing service director and head of service. We are able to have more integration. Our Beryl bikes have really been a success in Cornwall. We are trying to make sure those are in places where people need them. As you say, you can go from your bus station to town and then you can get a Beryl bike a bit further. That is working really well. Hopefully, the integrated transport strategy that the DfT is launching will give us further opportunities to bring this to a further level.

Q179 **Dr Arthur:** There will be further opportunities and hopefully further money for you. All this sounds like common sense, of course. What is it about enhanced partnerships that makes these things more likely?

Damien Jones: As I mentioned earlier, particularly with highways colleagues, it has brought the bus companies closer to those relationships. We talk about these things within the local authority, but it has given us more opportunities to have those conversations. "We are thinking about doing this to the network. What impact would it have on the bus system?"

Alistair Hands: The recovery from the pandemic has been an incentive to do that. It has brought operators and local authorities together with a challenge and a purpose in mind. How do you maintain a healthy network to join customers together? If you take the example of Leicester, the enhanced partnership has been really positive in doing that because the local authorities are able to bring bus priority measures to the party. There are eight that we have put in place. Those make the network itself more effective. To your point, it makes journey times lower; it connects people into where they need to be quicker; and we have a common, London-style payment system there.

It is that synergy: there is a need and you bring together the parties who have access to the funding or the operations; you can put it together and blend supported and purely commercial services. That connection makes it important.

When you consider the models, it is important to think about not just place but time. We have talked a lot about the risk of transition to franchising. There are places where enhanced partnerships can be the right thing in a place at a point in time to stabilise services, get the



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network performing as it needs to be and then consider what model of control is appropriately.

Dr Arthur: Yes, that investment is not a wasted investment.

Q180 **Steff Aquarone:** Just building on integration, I know I am going to get lynched by the eco mob for saying this, but one mode of transport that is still quite popular in rural areas is the motor car. You may have heard my previous question to the previous panel about whether we need to rethink the model of rural public transport a bit. Does enhanced partnership working allow for a radical rethinking of what the rural transport model could look like?

Naomi Green: Do you mean in terms of service provision or accepting that you might have to do a bit of your trip by car to connect to a point?

Steff Aquarone: I mean very much the latter.

Naomi Green: It is absolutely part of the solution. If you think about what you heard from Ms Barker from the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority, they have a guided busway. If you look at the number of people that drive to the busway to travel into Cambridge, it is huge. It is a really huge opportunity. The issue with that is that there are lots of people who cannot afford a car. It is a big barrier to young people. By not building public transport into those solutions, you are exacerbating that barrier.

If I may, I am going to give one example. I recently went to Silverstone to visit an incredible advanced manufacturing company. They bring lots of graduates there, and they feel very privileged to work there. They live in the neighbouring village. They do not drive. They cannot access a gym in the evening. They cannot access any social facilities. We are at risk of losing people like that because those facilities are not there. All they need is some public transport to make it an attractive long-term option for them.

Q181 **Steff Aquarone:** I want to think about the question of enhanced partnerships and how much of that they could do. I will build on your example, if I may. One argument would be that franchising, for instance, would allow the revenue from that popular route to subsidise a much more dedicated either DRT or small local electric minibus service for that exact reason. Does the enhanced partnership model allow that kind of flexibility? Could we be exploring any of these things within the current EP approach?

Naomi Green: The enhanced partnership model allows better conversations about it. I believe one of the big drivers for the Cambridge and Peterborough model was exactly the question you have asked. How do we use the benefit from high-frequency routes to support less affordable routes?



The enhanced partnership model is never going to do it in the same way, but the cost of implementing this in a more rural area is a big barrier for local authorities. One of the things that we are looking at at the moment is whether we could create a capacity tool to help individual authorities analyse whether or not franchising is a good route for them. That is not available at the moment. They do not have a way of going from where they are to a franchising model.

Alistair Hands: You have to separate out the two thought processes. How you fund rural connectivity is a separate question from the model of operations. Can enhanced partnerships do what you are talking about? Yes, absolutely they can. You can manage the network; you can co-ordinate frequencies; and the local authorities can support with shared facilities that all operators can use. It can absolutely bring people together to achieve that type of effect, but the concept that you would fund it purely from high-density routes is probably unlikely nationally.

Miriam Binsztok: We are focusing very much on the framework. The enhanced partnership is a framework. It is something that allows parties to come to the table and have conversations. As everyone has said, any model can work if you have enough funding. There is this whole idea that you can cross-subsidise and use some commercial profits to subsidise less profitable services. That can be very difficult, depending on the size of your area and how your network is designed. Any model or framework can work, if you have enough money on the table to make it work.

Damien Jones: In a lot of areas, we do not have those high-frequency services that are generating a lot of profit. There have been a lot of commercial withdrawals since covid. In particular, park and ride services have seen the smallest recovery in terms of the number of passengers. They are not necessarily dedicated services anymore; they are part of the network. We need to think about how we can repurpose park and ride and make it a more attractive option again by looking at different models for different areas.

Q182 **Steff Aquarone:** I want to ask Miriam specifically about the transformational improvements that you have seen in Cornwall. In the last discussion, we were taking about EPs being the lightest-touch way of bringing parties to the table. Certainly, some of the testimonies from Damien and Alistair made me realise that I was not aware of the conflict of resources that perhaps goes with hospital transport and school transport, but that does make sense. This is common sense stuff. Banging heads together makes sense. Can you tell us more about the transformational effects that you have seen? In particular, what have been the key aspects?

Miriam Binsztok: As I said, Cornwall had a commitment to working in partnership way before my time. Ten years back, we brought everyone to the table to talk about One Public Transport System for Cornwall. As I said before, with the contracts and the enhanced partnership, we were able to bring everyone to the table and have these conversations.



I have to be really honest. We have been very fortunate to get a lot of funding from DfT, which allowed us to undertake some key initiatives, such as our bus fare pilot. That was a four-year programme where we made the fares really low to test the assumption that low fares would bring more people to the buses. That was very critical in allowing us to work with the operators and create interoperability, standardised fares and deliver discounts. We just launched our young person discounts and our Transport for Cornwall app. We have—I cannot forget my bus timetable—all the bus times and all the operators together. That is something that we have to be extremely proud of. As I say, it has been very transformational to have that level of integration.

The way that the Cornwall network works, 50% is subsidised by the council and the other 50% is run commercially. As I said before, as a framework, the enhanced partnership has allowed us to have a setting where we can have these conversations and discuss with operators what we want to achieve, set out the vision and establish key performance indicators. They are not enforceable; they are there to set the direction. That has been really very fortunate for Cornwall.

With our BSIP, we are able to work with operators not only on the capital improvements and interventions to improve the overall journey for passengers but to look at how we can use the revenue portion of the BSIP to stabilise the network. That has been a very key direction for all of us. The team always says that our network is a bit like a rubber band. Our funding can only stretch so far. Even with the level of commitment and investment from Cornwall Council to fund public transport, we are still seeing some reductions of service. We are still having to look at how we can better allocate resources.

There are still things that we have to celebrate. In the results of the Your Bus Journey survey, which came out yesterday, we were one point higher than last year. Overall satisfaction continues to be good. That is a journey that will continue. There is never an end point. It is a journey. As we evolve the partnership, we will continue to look at what else we can do next.

Q183 Steff Aquarone: Is there one measure in particular that you are particularly proud of from yesterday's results?

Miriam Binszok: I would highlight overall satisfaction. We are really good. Something that we are always really good on is bus drivers. We can all be really proud of that. The bus drivers are the first impression. When you get on the bus, they are the ones who represent the service. That is something I am extremely proud of.

We are just about to deliver Transport for Cornwall training for drivers. We really want all of them to feel part of the partnership, regardless of which operator they are employed by.

Q184 Steff Aquarone: Can you tell us what the number was for very good



satisfaction overall?

Miriam Binsztok: It was 86%.

Q185 **Dr Arthur:** Before I ask my question, the point about bus drivers is absolutely key. In Edinburgh—Cornwall will be the same—tourists come from all over the world. Very often you hear them asking bus drivers for directions or asking where things are and how the city works. The drivers do a fantastic job at helping with that.

You said that half of your service or half of your routes are run for profit by private companies and the other half you subsidise. If you were to franchise that, surely you could bring them all together. There would be a chance that those profitable routes would help you with a subsidy and overall you might have a better service.

Miriam Binsztok: That is the concept. At the moment, we are working with our colleagues from ITP to undertake a really deep dive into Cornwall. That will look at the status quo, which is the enhanced partnership, and what we could do in a hybrid model or whether we could go all the way to franchising.

For franchising to work, from my point of view, and for us to be able to do exactly what you said, we need to get everything to a point. We have to create the right conditions for operators so they really want to come and compete. We need to have an environment where everyone feels like they can invest in Cornwall because the return is going to be there. We need to understand what else we can do for the passenger and what the benefits are going to be, but the business case also has to be sound.

As a concept, I completely agree with you. If we were to destroy the current network, start from scratch and put everything in the pot, would we have enough money? I do not know. It is a big risk for the local authorities. When we talk about franchising or the Better Bus Bill, et cetera, we have to remember the local quirks. In rural areas, we are never going to have the demographic density to make the network commercial. We need to take that into consideration.

Q186 **Dr Arthur:** We heard from Manchester that they felt like they inherited a failing system. You are telling us that you have a system that is improving. It might not be perfect, but it is improving. For you, franchising would come with risks in terms of cost and what the end product would be. It is a good counter to what we heard earlier.

Miriam Binsztok: Yes, it is about what we can do next. If I am really honest, there are areas that we would love to take over or have greater ownership of, but at what cost? When we come to the end of this process, we will look at the benefits and the financials. That will give us the direction in terms of how far we want to go. Nothing is off the table.

As was mentioned in the previous session, there is so much uncertainty at the moment around enhanced partnerships. It may be that the



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outcome of this inquiry will make enhanced partnerships fit for purpose. We have the Better Bus Bill. When it becomes primary legislation, what is the impact going to be? There are so many question marks at the moment. On the other hand, it is an opportunity for all of us to look at what we are doing and see what we can do better for our passengers.

Alistair Hands: If I can come in on that, if you are looking at trying to design a network that has the right outcomes, of course you can reinvest profits from profitable routes to sustain others, but in a franchise model the likelihood is that operators are going to be bidding on those routes and building in a margin anyway. That somewhat gets nullified. It really does come down to the level of investment required for franchising, the broader place-based economics of what you are looking to achieve and the risk of transition. That does not make it good or bad; that is just the equation you are trying to solve.

Dr Arthur: Yes, but it is also about integration. I do not know whether the profitable and subsidised services in Cornwall are integrated. Can people get on one bus and then change and connect to another one? Bringing it all together into one operation hopefully brings those connections in for people.

Q187 **Chair:** That is a question to ask. Can you go from a subsidised bus to a different operator in an enhanced partnership?

Alistair Hands: Absolutely, yes. I know Leicester gets quoted a lot, but in Leicester we have multi-operator fare capping. You can tap to get on any operator's bus.

Chair: That is not necessarily how it is everywhere.

Alistair Hands: We also have co-ordinated frequencies with other operators. That is brokered through the enhanced partnerships. On key routes, we will agree to co-ordinate our frequencies.

You do not necessarily need to franchise to achieve the types of things that you are talking about. If you do, you have more direct control and you can plan that, but you take on board the risk of transition and operating.

Chair: It is swings and roundabouts.

Miriam Binsztok: Just to answer the question, yes, we have interoperability. With regard to network control, the enhanced partnership provides a framework, but we still have some limitations with regard to what we are allowed to do commercially and competitively.

As I said, the team does an absolutely amazing job to try to integrate the network, make sure that we have that commercial network and the subsidised come back to fill the gaps, but it ends up being a bit like whack-a-mole when you do not have enough money.



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Q188 **Chair:** There is a question about reliability. Under the free-for-all that we have had outside of London, there was a reliability issue. Operators could turn up or not turn up as they felt. There is now a bit more oversight of that, but is there still a risk that buses might not arrive on time or suddenly change their route, not including emergency and roadworks issues?

Damien Jones: There is still a risk, but now there is a mechanism to have that discussion and deal with it, which there was not before.

Chair: It is now a conversation.

Damien Jones: You can also pre-empt some of those things through the partnership to stop that disruption happening.

Q189 **Chair:** There are no direct powers.

Damien Jones: There is no direct powers, no.

Chair: That is one of the fundamental differences.

Damien Jones: It is through persuasion.

Alistair Hands: It is done through consultation.

Chair: It is a consultation.

Q190 **Catherine Atkinson:** How much does data get shared? In coming to some of the strategic decisions, when you share data you can see where the gaps are. In enhanced partnerships, is there a mechanism to be able to have that shared data and then to look at it across different providers?

Damien Jones: It varies across the country. It depends on the strength of that relationship. There was a discussion before about the lack of data sharing, but I know that a lot of data is shared in a lot of areas, which then help develops the services between the commercial providers and the local authorities. You can do it through an enhanced partnership, but the bus companies have to trust the local authority in terms of what they are going to use that data for and how they are going to use it to develop services going forward.

Naomi Green: It is also very patchy between the different operators, including some of the smaller operators. Even with bus open data, the accuracy is quite patchy. It is harder as you have a wider range of small operators.

Miriam Binsztok: The concept of data is very broad. Whether it can be shared depends on the type of data. For some data, we use our contracts and other agreements. If we want to make a decision to franchise, we are going to need more access to data. That is possibly something that has to be looked at in the whole process. Is there any way that local authorities can have access to data earlier in the process?



Alistair Hands: In the last three to four years, the DfT has required enhanced partnerships to look at network sustainability reviews. If you look at the focus of the centre of excellence, that is potentially an area of focus that can make sure data is getting shared in a way that is supportive of the objectives of the enhanced partnership.

Q191 **Catherine Atkinson:** That will have to be collected in a treated way so we are measuring the same things.

Alistair Hands: It should be treated in the right way. It is in everybody's interest to do that. There are commercial sensitivities, but they are not insurmountable.

Q192 **Alex Mayer:** It might be worth getting on the public record the role of the traffic commissioner. We might have just misleadingly given the impression that you do not need to run your buses on time, whereas you will get in trouble if you do not.

Alistair Hands: We would raise two points specifically. The traffic commissioner absolutely requires them to run on time and monitors us. In a lot of local authorities, we also have real-time data that gets monitored. We are absolutely doing that. Moreover, it is not just the traffic commissioner; it is the end user. The customer will judge us if we do not run a reliable service. The service will not be as effective.

The other point is around changing services. Again, via the traffic commissioner we are required to follow a very strict process of consultation before we change routes. There is a 12-week lead time. At that level, I would not want to give the impression that there is no control.

Q193 **Alex Mayer:** How have enhanced partnerships led to stronger collaboration between operators and local authorities? Perhaps you could give us a couple of specific examples. Alistair, you just gave us a good one.

Alistair Hands: Yes, I have probably touched on my examples.

Miriam Binsztok: As I said before, we have initiatives in Cornwall with regard to integration of network planning. We have two major network changes to take into account the summer enhancement. We have co-ordination in terms of, "This is the date that the network will change. This is the information on the roadside". It sounds very operational, but it is a reflection of the strategic vision. Again, that is what the enhanced partnership really allows. The partners can come to the table and have these conversations in a protected environment. Before, without the enhanced partnership, there were some commercial sensitivities.

Alistair Hands: Just to build on that, one thing in many of our enhanced partnerships is that co-ordination of service change. Historically, operators might have done them on different days. In the enhanced



partnerships, we can align them so they all take place on the same day. That gives the certainty of it being one network.

Damien Jones: It is really good to help and develop the smaller operators through the partnership. We have a lot of issues in a lot of areas where those operators are giving up. We are struggling to get a new generation coming through to provide it. We can help those operators to develop and maybe get into running local bus services where they have not done that before. That can be a real positive.

Q194 **Alex Mayer:** I also want to ask about the relationships between different types of councils as well. We have situations where one council is the transport authority and another council is the highways authority. This is going to become an increasingly bigger problem as more MCAs are rolled out. What role can enhanced partnerships play in bringing councils of different types together?

Damien Jones: It will become more crucial because you will have more authorities where the highway authority is different from the transport authority. We have a real concern about losing that transport co-ordination. Some responsibilities will be with the combined authority and some, such as school transport, will remain with the council.

We are trying to look at how we can come up with some guidance on how to make that work in the future model to keep that integration together. As I said before, we spend a significant amount of money in many areas delivering things such as school transport. We do not want to lose the integration because a combined authority has made a decision about how to run their buses. It is about trying to think about how we can maintain that model.

Naomi Green: With our neighbouring STBs in Transport East and Transport for the South East, we brought all the enhanced partnership chairs together to talk about what needed to happen to strengthen enhanced partnerships. Certainly, where an enhanced partnership has a political leader, that person will often be on the combined authority board in devolved areas. That allows greater alignment between the combined authority and the enhanced partnership in that region.

The other thing that we have not explored is cross-boundary. You might have an enhanced partnership in one authority that is really well funded and then a neighbouring authority that is not. This has happened a lot with BSIP funding. One authority might be able to make really strong performance improvements, but just over the border that is not available. That has been a really big issue. It is being normalised, but there is a lot of catching up to do from the first round of BSIP.

Q195 **Chair:** I want to go back to the elephant in the room, which is funding. Even in London, our buses are cross-subsidised by the tube network. I understand that an EP can give the authorities the ability to raise precepts. Even local councils can raise precepts. To what extent are you



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using your authority's ability to raise precepts to help fund buses?

Damien Jones: A lot of local authorities still generate their own revenue funding that goes into the local bus network. I am not aware of any that have generated additional money through specific precepts via the EP.

Bus funding across local authorities is made up of a mix of revenue funding from the council. Section 106 for developments is also quite important. It is a constant jigsaw that is changing. You are trying to see what is happening to all those different pots of money for the next financial year and the financial year afterwards.

Miriam Binsztok: It is similar for us. Our local transport budget is funded by the core budget of the council. We try to get a bit of Section 106 and other income from the BSIP and the bus fare pilot. Yes, it is core funding from the council. As a unitary authority, it is a bit easier in some ways and harder in others.

Q196 **Catherine Atkinson:** We have talked a little bit already about the difficulties around cross-subsidisation. The Government's Buses Bill proposes to widen the definition of "socially necessary services" within enhanced partnerships. What are the implications of a service being designated as socially necessary? What would that look like?

Miriam Binsztok: As a concept, we can all agree that it is really good when primary legislation recognises the importance of local bus services as a guarantee of human rights. Access to public transport could be a human right in itself.

When you start reading the narrative of the Better Bus Bill, it is very similar to the operating model that we already have in Cornwall. We have commercially run services. When they are withdrawn or reduced, if there is no other commercial interest, the local authority can decide to step in or not.

If I am open and honest about the way that I see the Bill, I feel like it can be a bit vague about what "socially necessary" means. I am an example. I live five or six miles away from my employer and seven miles away from my hospital. I do not have a direct bus. I can do the journey, yes. If I were a 90-year-old woman, I would not be able to do it without other aids.

Damien and I had a chat before about putting that burden into the local authority. Unless the definition is extremely objective and says, "This is a scientific definition and there is no room for interpretation", it will create another burden on local authorities. It will create a situation such as home-to-school transport, where we have a range of statutory obligations that we are struggling to afford.

As a concept it is really good, but, if this is going to work for local authorities, there has to be an understanding that, even though some services will be carrying fresh air most of the time, they are still socially



necessary. At some point the local authority has to be able to say, "I cannot afford that". If it is a statutory responsibility, we are going to have to find a way.

Q197 **Catherine Atkinson:** You would like to see a stronger definition of "socially necessary".

Miriam Binsztok: It is my birthday, so I am going to ask for a few wishes. I would like to see a stronger definition if possible. We also need greater funding for local authorities. That has to be really defined, and we need greater clarity on the burdens and the flexibility that the local authority will have.

Naomi Green: Can I add one more wish to that? We need alignment with land use planning and other policy decisions outside the Department for Transport. Ultimately, particularly with buses, the social benefits are often not transport benefits. It comes back to the integrated national transport strategy. How we look at transport appraisal for socially necessary services is very different from how you might do it from a transport perspective. The decisions that come from other Departments are really important.

Damien Jones: Working with the LGA, we have concerns about the need to produce a list. If you get to a point where that money runs out and you have defined it as socially necessary, how do you then remove that service when you are trying to reduce your budget, if that is the issue?

Q198 **Catherine Atkinson:** Is that not that part of the benefit? In circumstances such as in the east midlands, we have seen such a huge reduction, more than anywhere else, in the number of bus routes. If the point is to stop so many people being cut off from ability to access the services that they really need, is that not partly the point?

Damien Jones: It is a benefit, but you have to have the money to pay for it. If it becomes an obligation on the council to pay for it, that is an issue alongside social care, education and all those other services that you have to deliver. It is perfect if the funding is available. If it is not, it becomes very difficult to do.

We were looking at whether you could build on it to have more transparency and accountability in how you make decisions about the services that you support or not. If there were an assessment of it, rather than it just being a list, you could show how you have come to those decisions about what you will support and what you will not.

Alistair Hands: You could also separate the definitions. There is a definition of what is socially necessary, but clearly the Government have stated that they want to allocate funding based on place-based needs and levels of deprivation, which we absolutely welcome. We also need to define the service that is provided. We have alluded to empty buses. That is probably not the right answer for anybody in a limited funding



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situation. What type of service is it? Is it a taxi service? Is it access to some other form of transportation?

Q199 **Alex Mayer:** Is there a danger that having a list of socially necessary services will mean that the services that could be enhanced, which has happened through various pots such as BSIP, are no longer enhanced by transport authorities? We talked before about how there has been a decline in high-frequency services. Rather than using the money to create high frequency, you are using the money to run empty buses, as you were talking about.

Alistair Hands: There is a risk that that could happen.

Damien Jones: In some areas, that will already be happening. You are using your BSIP allocation for the next financial year to maintain your network in the first instance, which then reduces the amount of funding you have to develop and enhance services.

Q200 **Alex Mayer:** Therefore, at the same time as producing a list of socially necessary services, should you also be producing a list of potentially necessary high-frequency services? Otherwise, we will be in a decline.

Damien Jones: Through the partnership in Devon, that is what we have done. Norfolk has been particularly successful at enhancing the best services, which increases the passengers. Those services become commercially viable, which means the local authority and the partnership can move on to the next level down and improve them. It does work.

Alistair Hands: That brings you back to the quality of the bus service improvement plan. There has to be a three-to-five-year ambitious network plan.

Miriam Binsztok: The concept works, but, if we are very honest with ourselves, trying to encourage people to use public transport—this comes back to the conversation that we had before—requires behaviour change and other interventions.

Whatever we do, whether it is franchising, enhanced partnerships or the Better Bus Bill, there has to be a holistic approach. It is not about only telling people, "You need to get a bus because it is good for the environment and the public purse". We need to make better use of other interventions, such as restrictions on parking and bus priorities. We need to think about how to promote behaviour change. It is not going to be something that is going to be solved in one, two, three or four years. It is going to be a long journey.

The example that I always use is around recycling. When we started recycling, however many years ago, we were like, "What is that?" It has now become such a part of our day-to-day that we do not even think twice about it. That is how we need to start looking at the future of travel. Movement needs to happen. People have to move from A to B. How can we make it so that everyone thinks about public transport first?



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Going back to what I said before, it is about investment. That is how we need to start framing it. There are lots of great ideas here and lots of great opportunities.

Q201 **Chair:** We need to close very shortly. I am going to give you all a chance to answer one more question very briefly. What are the most important things that would increase bus ridership and coverage outside urban areas?

Damien Jones: It is funding and bus priority, particularly when going from the rural into the urban.

Alistair Hands: It is punctuality, reliability and frequency. It is a combination of funding and also bus priority measures.

Naomi Green: It is information provision. We need to make things clear both digitally and for those who are not digitally able.

Miriam Binsztok: We need funding, investment and supporting legislation.

Q202 **Chair:** I will add time to that. You made that point very strongly. Thank you ever so much. I have one final supplementary question. What do you need in order to make the changes that you have just outlined? What is needed?

Miriam Binsztok: From a Cornwall Council point of view, we want a greater understanding of what a rural authority is and some of the buses that we run.

Q203 **Chair:** Do you mean a better understanding within DfT about the challenges?

Miriam Binsztok: Yes, from all decision-makers and lawmakers. If we are sitting here and we look outside, we see it happening. In a rural area, it is completely different.

Q204 **Chair:** We need a better understanding. What is needed to happen to make those changes?

Naomi Green: Without a shadow of doubt, all the EP conversations that we have had have identified the need for long-term funding settlements. That is not necessarily always more; it is about the certainty of funding so decisions can be made on how to use it. Alignment with other Government Departments' decisions is absolutely critical.

Alistair Hands: We need time and certainty to allow long-term funding.

Damien Jones: It is about knowing that there are different models available in different areas. A lot of the focus is on the big metropolitan areas.

Chair: That is why we had this inquiry.



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Damien Jones: We have a really good opportunity to do a lot of different things.

Chair: Thank you very much. As I say, do let us have any additional evidence that you feel you did not get a chance to cover or you have not already included in your written evidence. I would like to thank you very much for the time today and for the evidence that you have already sent. It has been really informative. We have found it very useful. We will continue collecting evidence as we progress. That concludes today's meeting.