

Written evidence submitted by the Somerset Bus Partnership (BCC0047)

Introduction

The Somerset Bus Partnership (SBP) is a voluntary group that represents bus users across the area administered by Somerset Council and campaigns for better bus services, acting as a critical friend to the Council and local bus operators. We are members of Somerset Council's Bus Advisory Board.

We endorse Somerset's Bus Vision, as set out in its Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP): *"Our vision for Somerset is to provide a more extensive and frequent network of services, that are comfortable, easily accessible, reliable, co-ordinated, and affordable which is aimed at making the bus a more attractive travel option, connecting rural communities and increasing bus patronage. Alongside this, we aim to reduce carbon emissions from the public transport sector."*

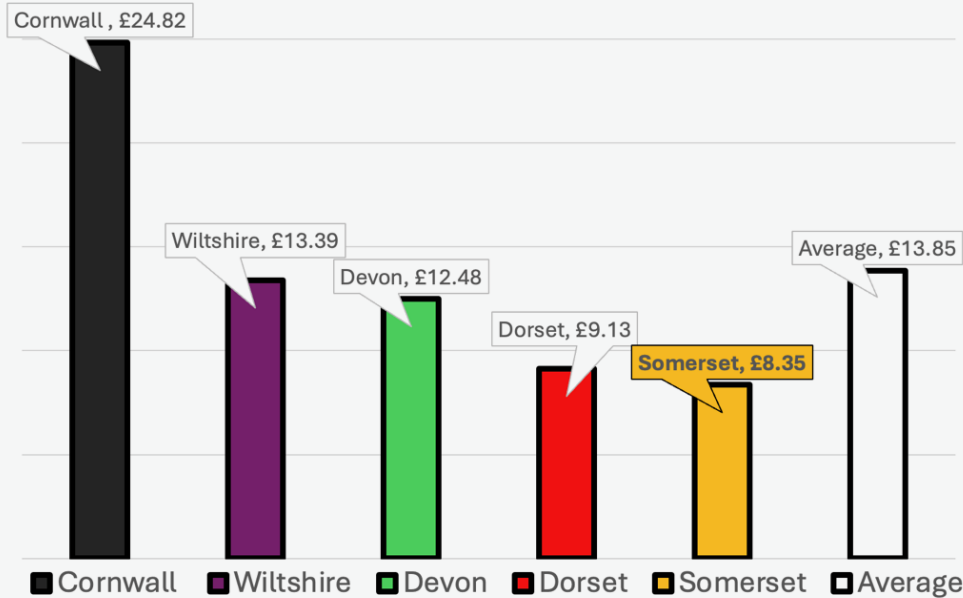
We welcome this opportunity to provide evidence to the Transport Select Committee, based on the experience of bus users in Somerset. We believe that buses have a vital role to play both now and in the future, and we want to ensure that the needs of a predominately rural county are taken into consideration.

Evidence on specific subject headings (taken from the Terms of Reference)

- a. How the Government's proposed reforms of powers over buses in England, and recently-announced funding, should take into account the particular challenges of rural areas and local authorities outside major cities, and how authorities in these areas can make best use of those powers and funding.***

Financial support for bus services per head of population is lower in Somerset than any other predominately rural transport authority area in South West England, as illustrated in the chart below.

**EXPENDITURE PER CAPITA
ON SUPPORT FOR BUSES
BY LTAs IN SOUTH WEST 2022-2023**



Notes

(1) - Figures from Mid-year Population Estimates: England & Wales - June 2022, Table MYE5

(2) - Figures from Bus Statistics Table BUS05di. Includes LTA net costs incurred in support of bus services, Bus Service Operators' Grant and reimbursement for concessionary travel. The last of those is not a subsidy.

To bring Somerset up to the regional average, additional support of £2.6m per annum is needed.

Whilst the funding of £3.3m capital and £3m revenue announced recently for Somerset in 2025-26 is very welcome, a large portion of the revenue funding will be needed to maintain existing services (including those introduced since 2023) in the face of rising operating costs.

The challenges of bus operation in rural areas are very evident in Somerset and were fully documented in the first BSIP, published in 2021. That was accompanied by a bid for £161m funding over 3 years to bring the local bus network up to the standard outlined in the National Bus Strategy. In the event, only £11.9m was awarded – 7% of the bid. Unsurprisingly, the award has done little to stem the long-term decline of the bus network and it barely justified the work that had been done in producing the BSIP.

A commitment to longer-term ring-fenced support for buses from the public sector, in place of one, two or three-year awards, is essential to give bus operators the confidence to invest, to give communities some much-needed

stability in bus service provision, and to give transport authorities the confidence to develop expertise in their transport teams to carry out their functions in a timely manner.

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b. The effectiveness of recent Government policy in tackling declines in bus services.

Between 2009-10 and 2022-23, bus passenger journeys per annum in Somerset fell by 51% - from 9.8m to 4.8m – but the national trend across England (excluding London) was a fall of 32%.

However, recovery from the pandemic has been in line with the national trend - with both Somerset and England (excluding London) at 76% of the figure for 2018-19. Taking these statistics alone, it appears that recent Government policy has been successful in assisting the bus network in Somerset to recover from the pandemic but it has not yet tackled the fundamental problem of long-term decline.

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c. How effectively bus services function as part of integrated multi-modal networks that improve mobility for people who live in areas with declining services.

There are ten stations on the national rail network in Somerset and they are served by a mixture of local, regional and inter-city services. Bridgwater and Highbridge & Burnham stations have an hourly service to Taunton and Bristol, whilst Yeovil Pen Mill, Castle Cary, Bruton and Frome have a two-hourly service to Weymouth and Bristol. In the south of the county, rail services from Crewkerne, Yeovil Junction and Templecombe run to Exeter, Salisbury and London Waterloo. The only station that has a frequent inter-city service is Taunton, with trains to London, Bristol, the North and the South West. Castle Cary has a two-hourly inter-city service to London and Frome has three trains per day to London.

In recent years, work has been undertaken at Taunton, Castle Cary and Bridgwater stations to bring bus services closer to the station entrances as part of interchange and accessibility improvements, although these schemes have

not been without snags. £5m was spent on the interchange at Bridgwater but buses have been unable to use it since its construction in 2019. There is a similar situation at Castle Cary, where only small buses can access the station forecourt owing to poor design. Bus passengers transferring from trains must stand on an unlit, unpaved area on a busy road.

The bus interchange at Taunton has made a modest improvement in respect of the bus service between Taunton and Minehead (First South West 28 and X28) - which has a dedicated waiting area and through ticketing. More needs to be done for other bus services, though. There are three different locations at the rail station to catch buses to the town centre and the key employment and residential sites.

The Minehead bus route replaced the former railway line upon its closure in 1971 and is used by many travellers to/from Butlins and the West Somerset coast. There are times of severe overcrowding, however, on camp changeover days, creating a poor image of bus/rail journeys.

There are opportunities to improve interchange at Bridgwater by working with EDF and Gravity (both significant employers) and the local tourist attractions across the Somerset Levels. Similarly, Highbridge & Burnham station could have much better connectivity with bus service 20 to/from the seaside resorts of Burnham-on-Sea, Brean and Berrow, and with bus service 21 to/from villages to the south.

In Yeovil, the two stations are linked to each other and the town centre by bus service 68 (operated by Somerset Council's in-house fleet) but the timetable connections between buses and trains are poor and not guaranteed, the service does not run at school start and finish times or during evenings and Sundays, the vehicle operated has very limited space for luggage and shopping, and it does not serve the key areas of employment, education and healthcare. Furthermore, although PlusBus tickets are accepted on service 68, Somerset Council is not listed as a participating operator on the PlusBus website (www.plusbus.info). We believe that tackling these basic issues will create opportunities to encourage much greater use of the public transport network in the town.

Crewkerne and Templecombe stations act as railheads for Beaminster, Bridport and Wincanton but the bus services are misaligned with trains, so connections are virtually impossible.

Frome has seen significant housing growth (with more under construction) but has seen little improvement in bus access to/from the station. Those bus services that run close by do not connect with train services. The opportunity to use Frome as a railhead for Longleat and other nearby leisure attractions is missed, therefore.

PlusBus add-ons are available for rail journeys to Taunton and the two stations in Yeovil but not all bus operators in those towns are listed as participating operators in the scheme (see www.plusbus.info). This limits the attractiveness and usefulness of PlusBus tickets.

Overall, the level of integration between bus and rail services in Somerset is poor by comparison to the neighbouring counties of Devon and Cornwall.

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d. The social and economic impacts of poor connectivity on access to education, healthcare, employment, and social inclusion in communities, as well as on the economy of towns and villages.

The principal impact of poor connectivity in public transport provision is that adult residents need to own and use cars to ensure good access to employment, healthcare, shopping and leisure facilities and young people become highly reliant on their parents or guardians to transport them to education and social activities, until they are old enough to drive themselves. Those who are unable to drive and poorer families – who cannot afford a car or maybe only one car – are thereby excluded from some services and activities. All rural communities need a basic level of bus service provision to their nearest urban centre and from there to the nearest large urban area. This should be added to the National Bus Strategy when it is reviewed.

Many towns and villages are now blighted by traffic and cars parked on narrow streets that were not built to accommodate them. This, in turn, causes delays to bus services – making them unreliable and unattractive. There have been

cases where bus services have been re-routed away from roads where they encountered delays on a regular basis. Bus priority measures must be provided in such places.

On certain days and at certain times – but on a regular basis – traffic congestion in Yeovil leads to bus operators abandoning their timetables because their buses get cumulatively later and later. There are no bus priority measures in the town. The consequence is a vicious circle of loss of confidence in the bus network, greater use of cars as an alternative, more traffic congestion, loss of patronage leading to bus service reductions and so forth.

The impact of badly-planned and uncoordinated road works on bus services must be considered too. Highway authorities and utilities must be required to plan their essential work well in advance, in consultation with the communities affected, and to give a high priority to minimising disruption to bus services.

Alongside improvements to the bus network, the planning system must be reformed to ensure that new developments are designed to give good access for all residents to bus services and that the road layout within large developments is “bus-friendly.”

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e. The effectiveness of current funding models and governance structures in enabling local transport authorities and commercial operators to improve, sustain and keep bus services outside major metropolitan areas affordable, and the potential effectiveness of alternatives.

We believe that the current funding model and governance structure for the bus network in Somerset is deficient in several areas. Successive governments have shied away from a root-and-branch review of Bus Service Operators Grant to steer it away from being a fuel subsidy but such a review is badly needed.

The £2 fare cap was successful in encouraging greater use of buses in Somerset – where the majority of single fares were higher than £2. To promote this initiative, the Somerset Bus Partnership produced decals to publicise the fare cap and attached them to bus shelters across the county.

We hope that the increase to £3 will not result in a loss of patronage and we are concerned about the potential impact of the restoration of “commercial” fare levels in 2026. We believe that recent experience has demonstrated the value of a permanent subsidy on bus fares to encourage sustainable travel.

A related issue is the need for a multi-operator network ticket in Somerset and more through ticketing for longer journeys that involve more than one operator’s services.

We see little evidence of a fresh approach on the part of bus operators to tackling the long-term decline. We would go so far as to say that the actions and attitude of some operators are those of companies that are risk-averse and content to manage decline rather than looking to invest for growth.

The Traffic Commissioner (TC) for each region has a key role to play in ensuring safety and fair play in bus operations but they are under-resourced and not equipped to deal with complaints about operating failures. We wrote to the TC for the West of England in December 2023 with details of 453 bus journey cancellations over a ten-week period in Somerset. We did not receive a reply and are not aware whether any action was taken by the TC.

We believe that bus operators should be answerable for persistent operating failures and that the TCs should be adequately resourced to carry out that function – including a public-facing role.

A related issue is the need for the TC to ensure that bus operators have sufficient maintenance facilities in their operating areas to deal promptly with breakdowns and to restore the bus service at an early stage. The closure of bus depots in Bridgwater and Yeovil by First South West had a detrimental impact on bus service reliability in Somerset because the residual maintenance facilities are at some distance from parts of the operator’s route network and not well-sited to enable the prompt restoration of services after breakdowns. We suggest that operators should be required by the TC to demonstrate the adequacy of maintenance facilities for the route network they operate.

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f. Evaluating the potential of alternative service models, including Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport, and

other innovations or technologies which could support or replace buses serving less populated communities, and what steps the Government should take to support them.

In our view, for DRT schemes to be successful, local transport authorities must create a community of service users and drivers that know each other and work together. The Somerset Bus Partnership has taken on the role of setting these up in the absence of any such work by Somerset Council.

We are sceptical of claims that DRT services can ever become commercially viable.

One failing of the DRT services in Somerset (branded “Slinky”) is that they operate within fixed borders and there is no facility to make a through journey by changing from one Slinky to another. We believe that DRT services should be seen as part of the overall public transport network with links to and from bus, coach and rail services as well as other DRT schemes. Through ticketing should be offered and interchange points should be equipped with good waiting facilities and real-time information.

There are thirty-one community transport schemes in Somerset and we believe there is a potential for shared taxi schemes (similar to Fare Car in Devon) too.

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g. How successful Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) have been so far in improving bus services outside major urban areas, whether franchising is likely to provide a better framework for these areas, and whether there are alternative models worth exploring.

Somerset Council made an enhanced partnership (EP) plan and scheme in April 2022, in advance of the award of BSIP funding. The EP Scheme was, therefore, very weak and did not commit the parties to do more than they were already doing. Subsequently, awards of funding enabled some specific facilities, measures and operational requirements to be added to the EP Scheme but it still lacks many of the expectations of the National Bus Strategy – even those that are low or zero cost. For example, there was no requirement on operators to adopt a Bus Passenger Charter or to set up a basic multi-operator ticket

scheme. Also, it took a year for the parties to agree on common change dates and add them to the EP Scheme.

The bus network in Somerset suffers from having no network identity and no comprehensive information. The Council leaves it to operators to post roadside timetables individually, instead of shouldering the responsibility to provide comprehensive information. This led to a situation in Frome where new poster display cases at two bus stops were covered with a variety of bus timetables in different shapes and sizes, presenting a very untidy and uncoordinated impression of the local bus network. We worked with Frome Town Council to produce and print tidy comprehensive displays.

Based on the evidence so far, we are not convinced that Somerset Council's EP Scheme will succeed in addressing the long-term decline in local bus services.

We are developing a proposal for a franchise scheme covering Somerset that could be taken up by the Council (subject to new legislation) or the proposed combined authority covering Dorset, Wiltshire and Somerset. Our view is that a franchise scheme will be a better option to improve bus services in Somerset but we are mindful that the set-up costs will be substantial.

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h. How well policy, funding and oversight of bus services allow services that straddle rural and non-rural areas, and local government boundaries, to be managed.

Bus services should be planned around the needs of passengers, not the boundaries of local authorities. Within the administrative area of Somerset, there are communities whose nearest urban centre is in a neighbouring administrative area and whose residents need transport provision to that neighbouring area. A flexible, common-sense approach and regular dialogue between transport officers in adjoining local authorities - to share information and discuss issues - is required in such situations. Our experiences in this area are mixed.

An example of poor cross-boundary working is bus service 99, funded by the West of England Combined Authority, that passes through the village of Chewton Mendip in Somerset but it not registered to stop at any of the bus

stops in Somerset. It could provide a useful additional facility for residents of that village at absolutely no cost to the funding authority.

One related problem that Somerset Bus Partnership has experienced in the past year is the difficulty in getting positive engagement with a very large operator based outside Somerset which now operates several cross-boundary commercial services that have supported elements added to them.

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