

## **Written evidence submitted by the Taunton Bus Users Group (BCC0105)**

On behalf of the Taunton Bus Users Group (TBUG), I am submitting our response to the inquiry on buses connecting communities. As representatives of passengers in Taunton Town and its surrounding areas, we wish to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities facing bus services, based on real-world passenger experience. We appreciate the committee's focus on ensuring that bus services effectively meet the needs of rural communities and support social and economic inclusion. Below, we address the specific terms of reference.

### **a. Government Reforms, Powers, and Funding for Rural Areas**

The proposed reforms and the recently-announced funding are a step forward, but rural areas like Taunton still face unique challenges in delivering reliable and accessible bus services. Low passenger numbers, long routes, and high operational costs make it difficult for commercial operators to offer viable services without additional support. We believe that local authorities outside major cities need greater flexibility to use funding in ways that respond to local needs—whether that's through more frequent services, better connections to key destinations, or tailored approaches like Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) in areas of low demand. The role of local authorities should be expanded to ensure they can make effective use of these powers and funding to meet the needs of rural communities.

### **b. Effectiveness of Recent Government Policy**

Recent government policies such as the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and the announcement of new funding are positive but fall short of addressing the deep-rooted issues faced by bus services in rural areas like ours. For example, while there has been funding for improvements, it hasn't always been sufficient to maintain the regular and frequent services needed in Taunton's more rural areas. The Taunton Bus Users Group has seen firsthand how cuts to services, particularly to areas like Musgrove Park Hospital, Bridgwater, and Taunton College, have adversely impacted our members' access to essential services, education, and employment opportunities. We urge a more targeted focus on rural services in future policies.

### **c. Integration with Multi-Modal Networks**

Integration of bus services with rail is crucial for ensuring that people in rural areas can travel efficiently and affordably. While Devon has made notable strides in integrating rail services with bus networks in places like Barnstaple, Okehampton, and Totnes, Taunton still faces significant gaps in this regard. Bus timetables often fail to align with train arrivals or departures, making it difficult for passengers to use both modes of transport in a seamless manner. There is a clear opportunity to improve this integration in Taunton, with better scheduling, coordinated ticketing, and infrastructure that supports multi-modal travel for all passengers.

#### **d. Social and Economic Impacts of Poor Connectivity**

The lack of accessible bus services has profound social and economic impacts in Taunton and surrounding areas. For instance, the poor connectivity to Musgrove Park Hospital and Bridgwater and Taunton College significantly limits access to healthcare and education for many residents. Furthermore, businesses like those in the Blackbrook Business Park suffer from limited foot traffic, as residents without access to private transport are unable to easily commute. Social isolation, especially for vulnerable groups like the elderly, is a growing concern as well. Inadequate bus services also stifle economic growth in rural areas by limiting access to work and economic opportunities.

#### **e. Effectiveness of Funding Models and Governance Structures**

The current funding models, primarily based on short-term government allocations, do not provide the stability needed to sustain and improve rural bus services. Local transport authorities need a more predictable and long-term funding approach to work with commercial operators in improving the affordability and coverage of bus services outside metropolitan areas. Additionally, governance structures should encourage collaboration between operators, local authorities, and passenger groups like ours to ensure that services are genuinely aligned with community needs. More flexibility in governance could help unlock the potential of smaller, community-focused models of transport provision.

#### **f. Potential of Alternative Service Models**

Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and community transport models offer promising alternatives to traditional fixed-route bus services in rural areas. These models could complement existing services and provide an essential

lifeline in sparsely populated regions. However, DRT needs appropriate funding, technology, and infrastructure to work effectively. The government should support pilot schemes, fund technological innovations, and create frameworks for integrating these services with conventional bus routes to offer a more responsive and efficient public transport network.

### **g. Enhanced Partnerships (EPs) and Franchising**

The Enhanced Partnership model has seen some success in Taunton but is limited by a lack of comprehensive strategic planning and long-term funding. Franchising, which allows for greater local control over bus services, could offer a better framework for ensuring that services align with public need rather than profitability. However, franchising needs to be considered alongside alternative models, such as co-designed services that involve local communities in planning and decision-making processes. This approach would allow for more flexible, user-driven service delivery.

### **h. Managing Cross-Boundary Services**

The management of bus services that cross rural and urban boundaries or local government areas presents a significant challenge. For instance, services between Taunton and surrounding towns like Wellington and Bridgwater are often poorly coordinated, with discrepancies in timetabling and service availability. Cross-boundary services need a more integrated approach, with clear policies and funding mechanisms to ensure that all passengers benefit from continuous, reliable services regardless of local authority boundaries.

### **Conclusion**

The Taunton Bus Users Group strongly advocates for a more comprehensive, integrated, and locally-responsive approach to bus service delivery. The government must ensure that funding is directed towards the specific challenges of rural areas and empower local authorities to develop transport solutions that truly meet the needs of all passengers. We look forward to the opportunity to continue working with the committee and all stakeholders to improve public transport services in our area.

Thank you for considering our submission.

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