

## Local Bus Services

House of Commons Public Accounts Committee

Submission by Later Life Ambitions

July 2025

### **Rationale**

Local bus services are the most used form of public transport. The Department for Transport published its national bus strategy for England, *Bus Back Better*, in 2021. Government strategy has sought to make buses more frequent, reliable, better coordinated and cheaper, alongside supporting post-pandemic recovery. While bus services are mostly run on a commercial basis, there is also public funding from DfT and local authorities, with £1.2bn spent on subsidies to the bus sector outside London in 2023-24.

The National Audit Office found in 2020, in its report on improving local bus services outside London, that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic reduction in bus travel across the country and created uncertainties about future travel habits. The Transport Committee, in its 2023 report on the implementation of the National Bus Strategy, found that while the strategy was ambitious, full of good ideas and supported by extra much-needed funding, the promised transformation had not been achieved.

Informed by the NAO's 2025 report, the PAC will hear from senior DfT officials on subjects including the performance of local bus services and any risks and barriers to improvement.

### **About Later Life Ambitions**

Later Life Ambitions (LLA) is a coalition that brings together the collective voices of over a quarter of a million pensioners from all four nations of the United Kingdom.

LLA consists of three member organisations: the Civil Service Pensioners' Alliance (CSPA), the National Association of Retired Police Officers (NARPO) and the National Federation of Occupational Pensioners (NFOP).

As a campaigning group, LLA has ambitious aspirations for the next generation of pensioners. From fair pensions to safe and sustainable care services, and from accessible housing to regular bus services to promote independence, LLA calls for bold and forward-looking action from political leaders and other decisionmakers.

In the UK today, there are 12.95 million people in receipt of the State Pension<sup>1</sup>; by 2030, there will likely be more than 13 million people in later life – each one with hopes, aspirations and needs. The issues pensioners face today will also impact on future generations of pensioners unless today's policymakers are willing to confront the challenges now. LLA welcomes the Committee's inquiry as an important opportunity to examine existing bus service provision and the success of the Department for Transport's successive bus strategies.

### **Call for action:**

- We welcome the Government's £712 million funding package for local authorities to improve local bus services, but this must be accompanied by a renewed focus on accessibility and affordability given that ~3.4 million people in England travel regularly by bus, making it the most commonly used mode of public transport.

- Local transport authorities and decision makers should work with transport operators and providers to improve the physical accessibility, safety and reliability of journeys as a whole.
- We are calling for consistent concessionary travel across all public transport networks
- LLA – like many other age sector organisations across the UK – calls for an Independent Commissioner for Older People and Ageing as part of an overall strategy to tackle the challenges faced by older people now and in the future, and to offer those who need it, advocacy, and legal support.

#### **Our response:**

1. Public transport is not meeting the needs of many older people. The most frequent reasons for not using public transport among those 65 and over are that it's not convenient and does not go where you want. Our members often raise the accessibility of local bus services as a barrier to greater usage.
2. Decent and affordable public transport is a vital line of support for older people, enabling them to retain their independence. Yet lack of access to public transport can have a significant impact on an older person's quality of life. Two in three older people cannot reach a hospital within 30 minutes by public transport, while in England alone 27% of bus routes, measured by mileage, have disappeared in the last ten years with a total of 5,000 routes closing altogether. A further 2,160 services were lost in 2022-23. Indeed, during the Second Reading of the Bus Services (No 2.) Bill [HL], many MPs make representations to the Secretary of State on the importance of local bus services for older people.
3. Given elderly people are already at higher risk of social exclusion due to reduced access to opportunities, services and social networks, especially those living in rural areas or from a lower socioeconomic background, the Government's proposed reforms provide an opportunity for local authorities to better serve those for whom bus services act as lifeline to social and economic participation. The lack, or availability, of suitable transport facilities and its impact on older people is often overlooked as a cause of isolation and loneliness – many are not able to travel to meet friends or family. This isolation can be significantly increased when the partner of one dies and the remaining partner, often women, cannot and never have driven. The importance of accessibility and availability is exacerbated when you consider the number of older people generally who cannot drive or who have been obliged to surrender their licenses due to age and related illnesses.
4. Later Life Ambitions' pensioners' manifesto calls for increased investment in local bus and services, for uprated concessions, and for improved accessibility and assistance for older people on all new bus services and associated facilities.
5. LLA therefore supports the Government's commitment, contained within the Bus Services (No 2) Bill, to improve the accessibility of bus stations and bus stops. Public transport providers should design their services with older transport users in mind, using technological improvements and customer insight to improve their experiences.
6. We would like local authorities to have a statutory requirement to provide and maintain minimum standards of accessibility for older people in a supported bus network, in addition to adequate assistance for older people on buses and the wider public transport network. This would go some way towards arresting the decline in bus ridership for elderly or vulnerable people.
7. Another issue which affects bus usage is its integration with other forms of transport, especially in more rural areas where route coverage is limited. We welcome the ambition of the long-awaited National Transport Strategy as a means of delivering more coordinated timetables and improved route planning through local authorities – the organisations that best understand the transport needs of their communities.

8. Accessibility goes beyond being physically able to board a bus. The move over the last decade to a more digital approach to transport services, such as information about timetables, has contributed to a well-documented sense of digital exclusion felt by those in later life. We are hopeful that the devolution of bus powers will improve communications around bus services, and we call for residents to receive paper correspondence notifying them of any updates and timetables changes.
9. We also support the increased funding announced by the Department for Transport, both to bus operators and local authorities; however, this money should ensure that crucial routes are protected and local stakeholders are consulted on local authorities' proposed franchise arrangements to maximise benefits for local communities.
10. In a population whose age is rising inexorably, elderly people are a significant demographic who must be at the forefront of local decision-making processes when local authorities take a greater role in bus franchising.
11. A key concern for LLA when considering the Government's proposed reforms is around concessionary travel schemes, with simplicity and ease of use vital to arrest the decline in bus services. In England, the concessionary bus pass can only be used on local buses with limited concessions allowing travel to locations across borders. In contrast, the bus passes issued in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales generally allow full access to public transport across the country. We want a transition to a nationally administered travel pass system for pensioners, which can be used on all forms of public transport – buses, coaches, rail and tram – which would incentivise older people to travel, both locally and nationwide. Travel provides social benefits, allowing older people to attend medical appointments, access shops, and meet with friends and family, thereby combatting loneliness and presents economic benefits to the UK economy.
12. Without effective transport, older people are more likely to be exposed to loneliness and isolation, particularly those living in rural areas. Where assistance is given to older people to access transport, it has a dramatic effect on improving their quality of life.
13. Support and guidance from the Department for Transport, the Department for Work and Pensions and local government, amongst others, is vital to ensure adequate and accessible public transport provision. However, no single organisation can respond to these needs alone – especially as the UK population ages – and there is no overall strategy to prepare for the complex social and policy challenges that this will generate.
14. LLA calls for an Independent Commissioner for Older People and Ageing as part of an overarching strategy to tackle the challenges faced by older people now – such as the distance of bus stops from key facilities such as GP surgeries – and in the future, and to offer those who need it, advocacy, and legal support.
15. An independent commissioner in England could raise issues in real time to Ministers, ensuring that the concerns of our ageing population are represented in the appropriate fora. The postholder would champion the rights of older people and give them a genuine voice that reflects their views and experience. This is especially important in transport policy, with such a diverse range of stakeholders seeking to influence decision-makers.

### **Conclusion:**

LLA wants to see a comprehensive strategy for improving bus service accessibility and simplicity as part of any statutory reform of bus services. Local authorities are well placed to understand and consult with those that rely on these services to participate in society, and with the funding allocated by central government, there is an opportunity to improve elderly

people's quality of life – but ease of access must be prioritised, both in legislation and local authority decision-making.

We will work with everyone concerned to reflect the views of our members and find solutions across the board. Please let us know if you require any further information as part of your inquiry.