



A call against the decline in local bus services

Resolution Shortlist Briefing Notes



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Over the last decade there has been a massive decline in the number of bus services, particularly of those in rural and semi-rural areas. In order to alleviate loneliness, improve health and wellbeing, as well as promoting sustainable development, the NFWI calls on the Government and local authorities to increase subsidies and work in partnership with bus companies and community transport operators to enable an adequate provision of services.

Proposer's position

The proposer would like the importance of a local sustainable bus service, particularly in rural areas, to be more widely recognised. In light of the falling coverage of bus services and the wide-spread impact on communities, this resolution calls on local and national government to take action.

The scale of the problem

Since 2010, local authorities have faced budgets cuts which have put pressure on the delivery of local services such as health centres, post offices and libraries. Those without access to a car rely heavily on public transport, and the loss of a bus service can reduce access to services and facilities and contribute to social exclusion and loneliness.

According to the Campaign for Better Transport, council bus budgets have been cut by 45% since 2010. Local authorities across England and Wales were found to have taken £182 million away from supported bus services over the decade, affecting more than 3,000 bus services in England and 259 in Wales.

According to Rural England, about half of people in smaller villages do not have access to any public transport and young people's access to education is being impacted by poor public transport provision.

The current situation in the UK

In the UK, approximately 80% of bus services are commercial. While this means they are not funded directly by local councils, operators of 'local bus services' in England and Wales are entitled to receive a grant (the Bus Service Operators Grant) to help recover some of their fuel costs. The grant, which is paid by central government to local authorities, is designed to keep fares down and enable operators to run services that might otherwise be unprofitable and might otherwise be cancelled. However, according to The Campaign for Better Transport, the Bus Service Operators Grant fell by 20% in 2012-13 and has not increased since. The Local Government Association has warned that as the cost of reimbursing commercial operators is more than the funding provided through the grant, these services are running at a cost to councils.

As a consequence of funding pressures, bus services in many areas in England and Wales are gradually reducing. The Campaign for Better Transport is therefore calling on Government to develop a National Investment Strategy for Buses and Coaches. The charity notes that

buses are the only form of transport in England not to have a long-term strategy. In June 2018, the Local Government Association (LGA) highlighted the scale of the problem warning that councils in England will struggle to maintain current subsidies for local bus services as their funding gap is likely to exceed £5 billion over the next two years. The Association reports that “many [councils] across the country are being forced into taking difficult decisions to scale back services and review subsidised routes”. The LGA is calling on Government to grant councils the powers they need to protect bus services as well as commit more funding. This call for additional funding has been echoed by the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales who has urged the Welsh Government to invest in public transport.



While support for local bus services in some local authorities has been reduced or cut entirely, there are places where services have been protected and creative ways of managing them developed.

A report for the Confederation of Passenger Transport identified a number of drivers of the reduction in bus journeys, including increasing car ownership, increase in online services and home delivery, reduced bus services and increased bus journey times (due to congestion) and increases in bus fares. Other drivers include changes to working patterns and competition from other forms of public transport.

In July 2018, the House of Commons Transport Committee launched an inquiry into the health of the bus market.

The Bus Services Act 2017 gives councils power to work in partnership with local transport companies to look at measures to improve local bus services and encourage the public to use buses. If bus companies cannot operate commercially in an area, the Act calls on councils to take action to ensure that provision are available by partnering with bus operators.

How could the WI work on this issue if it was passed?

A full campaign would be developed by the NFWI if the resolution is passed, taking into account developments since then. To help inform your discussions, here are some ways the WI could consider working on this issue.

At local and regional levels, members could raise awareness of the importance of local bus provision, especially in rural areas, and promote bus use as a sustainable form of transport.

Nationally, the NFWI could work with organisations such as Campaign for Better Transport and the Local Government Association to call on Government to provide more funding to local authorities for the provision of bus services.

Arguments for the resolution

- A bus service is a vital tool for connectivity, growth and social cohesion. It ensures that communities remain sustainable, reduces social isolation and ensures access to employment, education and local facilities such as shops, leisure centres and health services.

Arguments against the resolution

- The NFWI already has a number of mandates relating to public transport in rural areas (June 1956, May 1963 and April 1948) so a new one may not be deemed necessary.

Further information

Campaign for Better Transport: <https://bettertransport.org.uk/buses-in-crisis-2018>

Local Government Association: <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/lga-nearly-half-all-bus-routes-under-threat-because-funding-cuts-local-government>

If you would like to find a local speaker you could try contacting:

- Your local authority – a local councillor or official may be able to attend to talk about how they support local bus services
- Local passenger groups – some groups are listed here <https://bettertransport.org.uk/local-campaigning/list> but there may be others in your area.

Video content

This video examines the case of the decline in local buses in Gloucestershire:

<https://www.glocestershirelive.co.uk/news/millions-miles-bus-services-been-1220461>

Public Affairs Department Contacts

If you have any questions about the resolutions or the resolutions process then please get in touch with the NFWI Public Affairs department.

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