

Local Government Association (LGA) briefing

Bus Services Bill

House of Commons, Second Reading

Wednesday 1 March 2017



Key messages

- The LGA supports the overall aims of the Bus Services Bill. As the most used form of public transport, buses support local economies by connecting communities and providing access to vital public services and jobs. By reforming the bus franchising system, the Bill will provide local transport authorities with a more effective set of powers to improve services for local residents, and reverse the decline of services in areas outside London.

Advanced Quality Partnership and Enhance Partnership Schemes

- Under an Advanced Quality Partnership Scheme (AQP scheme), a local transport authority can introduce bus improvement measures when a scheme is introduced instead of being restricted to providing new infrastructure. We are supportive of the development and creation of new and existing partnership schemes. However, we want to ensure these schemes are a practical option for councils and sufficient support is provided by commercial bus operators.

Bus franchising

- It is imperative the Bus Services Bill progresses in the House of Commons, and becomes an Act of Parliament. The Bill introduces much needed improvements to simplify and make franchising more accessible. We therefore do not want the Bill to fall, and as such, we are offering a way forward for all councils on bus franchising which acknowledges the Government's recent response to the Transport Committee's enquiry into the Bus Services Bill. We recognise the Government's publicly stated intention to overturn amendments made in the House of Lords on extending bus franchising to all areas, and reverting to the original Bill proposal.
- Where it is appropriate, some local areas may wish to bid for bus franchising powers to improve local transport services. Mayoral combined authorities should have automatic and immediate access to these powers. We want to ensure that all Government decisions on franchising for other areas are transparent, timely and achievable. The LGA will be working with the Department for Transport to ensure the secondary legislation is clear about the process for accessing franchising powers, in order to secure the best deal for all councils, including those in non-mayoral combined authority areas.

New municipal bus companies

- We are pleased that Peers voted in support of an amendment to ensure councils retain the power to form new municipal bus companies. It's important this clause was removed from the Bill, as councils should continue to be allowed to form new companies which are able to compete either in the open market place or for council contracts (if they are able to offer a better service and value-for-money for bus users, or step in as a provider of last resort).

Briefing

Other reforms, including funding

- We would like the Government to pursue, in parallel with the Bill, other measures to promote bus services. This includes fully funding the national concessionary fares scheme, devolving Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) to all areas and implementing local authority enforcement powers for moving traffic violations. Supporting more councils to adopt Workplace Parking Levy schemes will also help to reduce congestion and attract an improved bus offer from operators.

Further information on key clauses

Bus franchising (Clauses 4 – 6)

The LGA supports the progression of the Bus Services Bill, and wants to ensure Mayoral Combined Authorities has immediate access to bus franchising powers, as set out in the original proposal for the Bill. Any decision made by the Government on franchising for other areas should be transparent, timely and achievable. We will be calling for the Government to commit to clarifying the criteria by which the Secretary of State will make a decision on whether an authority's bid for franchising powers will be considered. It is important that once the Secretary of State has approved a franchising deal for a non-mayoral area, that the decision then triggers automatic franchising rights to all other authorities of the same type. We want to ensure that the Secretary of State's decision on any franchising application, regardless whether it is positive or negative, should also be made public, with a full explanation and within a set time period.

Advanced Quality Partnership and Enhance Partnership Schemes (Clauses 1-3 and 9-15)

Advanced Quality Partnership Schemes (AQP scheme) build on the existing Quality Partnership scheme arrangements. Under an AQP scheme, local transport authorities can introduce bus improvement measures when a scheme is introduced instead of being restricted to providing new infrastructure. It also broadens the categories of service standards which bus operators participating in a scheme must meet, including a requirement that multi-operator tickets are marketed and advertised in a clear and consistent manner by all operators in the scheme.

The LGA welcomes the development and creation of these new and existing partnership tools. It will enable councils to offer other measures such as parking or traffic management policies as well as, or instead of, facilities provided by them, such as bus lanes. It is important that the secondary legislation ensures that franchising is a practical option for councils and one that can be affordably and easily pursued by councils.

Wider reforms to promote bus services

Open Data (Clause 17)

We are supportive of the Bill's proposals on open data, which will provide more accurate door-to-door journey planning across England. This should also give new opportunities for technology companies and app developers to deliver information services that will make bus travel more attractive to local people. It is important that new open data requirements on local councils are compensated through the new burdens doctrine by the Government.

Powers to reduce congestion (Clause 1)

Councils already do what they can to promote local bus services, including the creation and enforcement of bus priority lanes which help to ensure that bus services run reliably and on time, avoiding congestion. There are other measures that the Government can take to help councils reduce congestion in order to improve the punctuality of bus services.

It was positive to see the Bill successfully amended, to ensure local authorities have the power to enforce traffic offences, as part of an advanced quality partnership scheme. However, we will be calling for all councils to have enforcement powers to deal with moving traffic offences to help improve the reliability and punctuality of buses, making them a more attractive mode of travel.

Funding reforms

As well as the wider measures above, we urge the Government to pursue, in parallel with the Bill, financial reforms to promote bus services. We are calling on the Government to commit to fully funding the concessionary fares scheme which is currently underfunded by at least £200 million. Councils have been forced to reduce supported bus services by more than 12 per cent in the last year alone in order to try and fill the gap. It is also important that the Bus Services Operators Grant (BSOG) is devolved to councils, the vast majority of which currently goes directly to bus operators.