

# Rural Services APPG

**CHAIR: The Rt Hon Philip Dunne, MP**

Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
Secretary of State for Transport  
Department for Transport  
Great Minster House  
33 Horseferry Road  
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4<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Dear Grant

## **Rural Bus Strategy**

On 14<sup>th</sup> July 2020, the Rural Services APPG considered the main difficulties faced by rural bus services in England, and how these might be overcome. The APPG received a presentation by First Group Buses on behalf of the Rural Services Network which provides our Secretariat.

It has become clear that, even in a pre Covid 19 environment, the ongoing viability of many remaining rural bus services has been severely compromised. There is a significant risk that the ongoing decline of such services, with reducing patronage leading to even more stringent cuts may result in the virtual elimination of such services across large rural areas.

September 2019 saw your Department announce details of funding for local authorities to replace services lost through cuts, for bus priority, for demand responsive services in rural/suburban areas and for an electrification demonstration, in total some £220m in 2020-21. Whilst this is to be welcomed, this will not in itself address the strategic problems affecting rural buses. For instance, electrification is not possible for many of these routes with current technology. Demand responsive services, whilst essential in many rural areas, do not achieve the same success as fixed route buses due to their lack of visible presence. Replacing historic lost services is becoming less pressing than retaining those that remain. The impact of Covid 19 has exacerbated these issues across the UK and will require ongoing assistance to operators and authorities to rebuild the industry. But that also gives us an opportunity for a fresh approach.

The promise of £5bn for public transport, walking and cycling, announced this February alongside “A better deal for bus users”, in which the Department declared its intent to publish a national Bus Strategy in Autumn of this year, provides the vehicle for that opportunity. The APPG considers that it is imperative that the unique circumstances pertaining to rural bus services are recognized in this, and that special account is taken of these – indeed we would ask for a specific Rural Bus Strategy to respond to the unique and special circumstances of rural areas and the residents thereof. There are significant opportunities if we act quickly to ensure the future viability of services and indeed to hasten their spread into hitherto unserved areas.

In this letter I set out the five calls to action from the Rural Services Network/First Group Buses which we as the Rural Services All Party Parliament Group endorse. Some of these may be quite radical and will require brave decisions – but will clearly indicate future intent to develop the rural bus. These

suggestions should be viewed in the context of both the Comprehensive Spending Review and the Bus Strategy.

**Our five calls to action:**

- 1 Our first call to action is for the **establishment of a central resource of data, advice and good practice**. Whatever is done to address the revival of the rural bus, we need to be able to measure its success and this requires a sound statistical basis. The government should build on the pilot scheme in Cornwall to establish clear and consistent guidance from central government with dissemination of the gains which have been realised through application of best practice.
- 2 Our second call to action is for the **Government to develop an evidence based Rural Bus Policy that places a duty on (and allocates funding to) local authorities with rural areas to provide a Rural Bus Strategy, which among other things need to link areas of social deprivation with community and transport hubs**. The funding settlement should, in part, be based on meeting specified criteria, with payments based on measured indicators including increasing network coverage in rural areas, patronage growth and ensuring that the standard deviation of journey times resulting from traffic congestion does not increase. It should also be contingent on the development and implementation of a Local Bus Strategy which integrates public transport into other local authority functions, including development and planning. A funding horizon of at least five years should be confirmed from the outset.
- 3 Our third call to action is for an **investigation into the opportunities, risks and financial implications of any new regulatory regime applicable to local bus operation** where vehicle size, operational mileage and hours and geographic scope are limited, irrespective of the nature of the organization providing the service. A trial area should be immediately established for such a regime.
4. The fourth call is to ensure rural areas also see the benefits of **greener forms of transport, including buses**. Part of the funding allocation for the Bus Strategy should allow for pilots of hydrogen fuel cell and electric buses in rural areas.
5. Our final call to action is to use the opportunity of leaving the EU to minimise the **regulatory burdens** placed on rural bus services. There should be an encouragement of partnership in its widest form, including the health, education and planning functions of authorities as well as transport.

The Rural Services Network has also examined the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on local bus services and identified areas where it is essential to act to prevent adverse longer-term consequences. I would be pleased to share the details with you. The bus industry has been very pleased with the support it has received during lock down and emergence therefrom, but remains concerned that messages of “avoid public transport” continue to harm customer confidence.

I sincerely hope that the bus and coach share of the £5bn promised for sustainable transport announced in February can, in part, be allocated to the renaissance of the rural bus in England, delivered through the policy interventions we recommend above.

Yours sincerely



**Rt Hon Philip Dunne MP**

Chairman, APPG Rural Services