

# RURAL TRANSPORT CHAPTER

RURAL  
PLANNING



RURAL  
ECONOMIES



RURAL  
TRANSPORT



RURAL  
CONNECTIVITY

RURAL  
AFFORDABLE  
HOUSING

FAIR  
FUNDING

# WINNING THE RURAL ✓OTE

## A ROADMAP TO RURAL SUCCESS



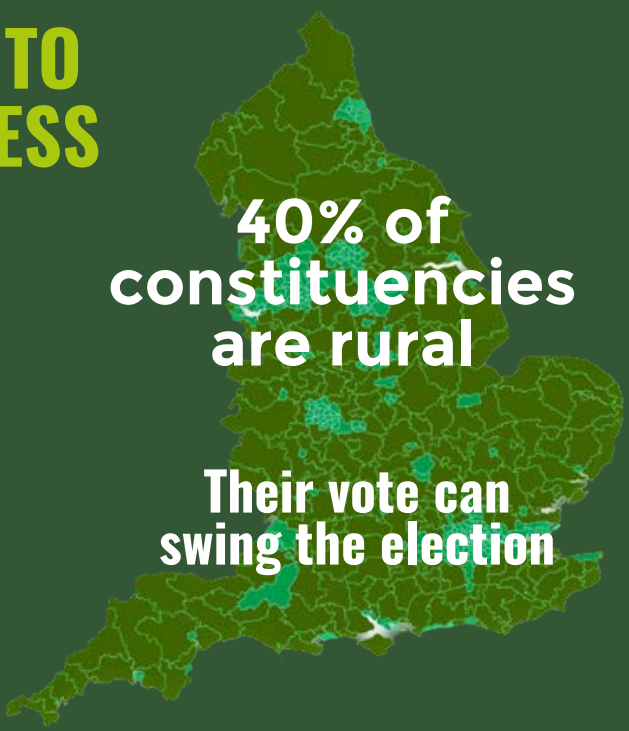
RURAL  
NET ZERO

RURAL  
HEALTH &  
CARE



40% of  
constituencies  
are rural

Their vote can  
swing the election





Rural Transport



RURAL  
SERVICES  
NETWORK



WINNING THE  
RURAL ✓OTE

## 40% of Constituencies are Rural. Rural Transport Matters.



Transport is vital for the quality of life and economic health of rural areas, yet it faces challenges such as infrequent public bus services and less Government funding compared to urban regions. It's essential for providing access to employment, healthcare, and social opportunities, particularly for those without personal vehicles, and is crucial for local businesses and economic growth. Public transport is especially important for rural youth, supporting their educational and career endeavours.

However, limited transport options can lead to isolation, especially among the elderly, and increase environmental issues by promoting car dependency. Future policies need to balance sustainable transport options like electric and ultra-low emission vehicles with reducing car use in rural areas.

Current national policies include deregulated bus services with local authority subsidies for necessary routes. Government support through grants and fare caps has been vital during the Covid-19 crisis. The National Bus Strategy aims to improve services, but funding distribution has been unequal, with specific age groups like 17 and 18-year-olds still facing challenges.

Looking forward, the Government's focus on rural mobility through strategies and initiatives like the Rural Mobility Fund and Rural Fuel Duty Relief Scheme, along with the emphasis on public transport in the Levelling Up White Paper, shows a commitment to enhancing rural transport infrastructure and reducing emissions.



[www.rsnonline.org.uk](http://www.rsnonline.org.uk)



# THE NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

1985

## Introduction of the Transport Act

Obligation on local authorities to identify socially necessary services

1986

## Deregulation of Bus Services

Since bus deregulation in 1986, bus companies set their routes and schedules, mostly on a commercial basis. Local councils can fund unprofitable routes, often in rural areas. The 1985 Transport Act requires councils to support necessary services, but budget constraints can prevent this.

2020

## Covid-19 Bus Support Grant

When passenger numbers collapsed in 2020, after the onset of the pandemic, Government announced emergency funding for bus operators, known as the Covid-19 Bus Service Support Grant. That was superseded in 2021 by the Bus Recovery Grant, which ran until summer 2023.

2021

## National Bus Strategy

The Government committed an extra £3 billion to support bus services outside London during the current parliamentary period. Local transport authorities were asked to produce Bus Service Improvement Plans and to commit either to form Enhanced Partnerships with bus operators or to work towards service franchising. Much of the funding was allocated on a competitive bidding basis, which led to some shire councils receiving fairly substantive amounts but most receiving little or none.

2022

## Cap on Bus Fares

The Government introduced a cap on bus fares, seeking to attract more passengers and make more routes financially viable. The cap has since been extended to November 2024 and is now set at £2.50 per single fare.

2023

## Concessionary Fare Re-Imbursement

The Government consulted on aspects of Concessionary Fare Re-Imbursement (to operators). The national statutory concessionary fares scheme provides free travel on local buses to those aged 65 or over or with a disability (outside peak times). In rural areas where there are few, or no buses, the concession is of no value. Children up to age 16 are also eligible for free bus travel to school for journeys over 3 miles. Local authorities may fund extensions to the concessionary fares scheme, though doing so has become less frequent as their budgets have reduced. 17 and 18-year-olds are not covered by any statutory scheme, despite now having to remain in education or training. The Government has yet to respond to that consultation.

## Future of Transport, Rural Strategy

The Government published a call for evidence to inform this proposed rural strategy (which follows an urban strategy published back in 2019). The evidence call seeks views about its assessment of rural mobility trends, transport opportunities and innovation, and the approach needed to shape this to create rural benefits. Its focus is on changing technologies, service demands and business models.

## Rural Mobility Fund

An interim evaluation of the Fund was published in June 2023. Services run by community transport providers often provide complementary services or routes, typically using minibuses or cars to assist specific groups (such as older people). They typically rely on grants and use volunteer drivers to reduce operating costs. A £20 million Rural Mobility Fund was established by Government to trial demand-responsive transport solutions in rural and suburban locations over the period 2021 to 2025. It is expected this Fund will enable 14 local schemes.

## Bus Services Operators Grant

The Government consulted on aspects of the Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) which is important to rural areas. BSOG is described by the Government as "a grant paid to operators of eligible bus services and community transport organisations to help them recover some of their fuel costs". BSOG also aims to benefit passengers by helping operators keep fares down enabling them to run services that might otherwise be unprofitable and could lead to cancellation. The Government has yet to respond to that consultation.

2024

## Extension of the bus fare cap continues





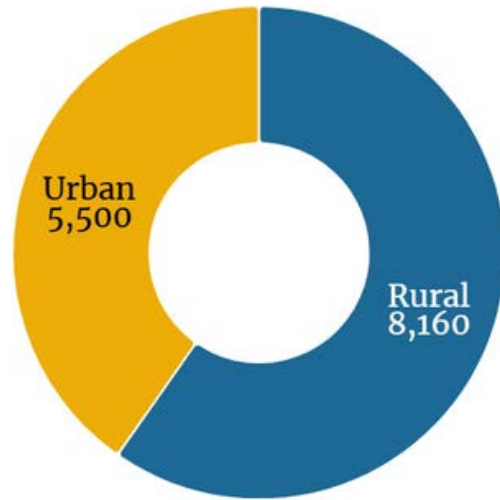
# THE RURAL REALITY

Rural residents travel further than their urban counterparts.

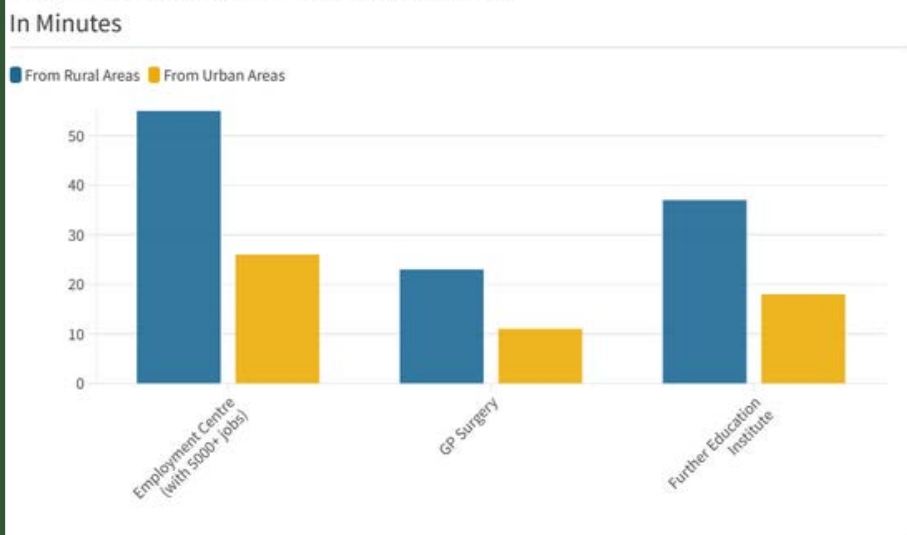
Those living in small rural settlements (villages and hamlets) on average travelled 8,160 miles in 2022. That is 47% more than the average resident from an urban town or city. Whilst travel was curtailed in 2021 by the Covid pandemic, the rural-urban comparison shown here matches a long-established trend.

[1] National Travel Survey 2022 statistics, Department for Transport.

**Average Distance Travelled By Residents During 2022**  
Miles



**Average Minimum Travel Time By Public Transport Or Walking To Reach Nearest Service Or Centre**  
In Minutes



Travel times required to reach a workplace or services are typically longer for rural than for urban residents.

This time difference is most marked for those who rely upon public transport, as the statistics below for the year 2019 show.[2]

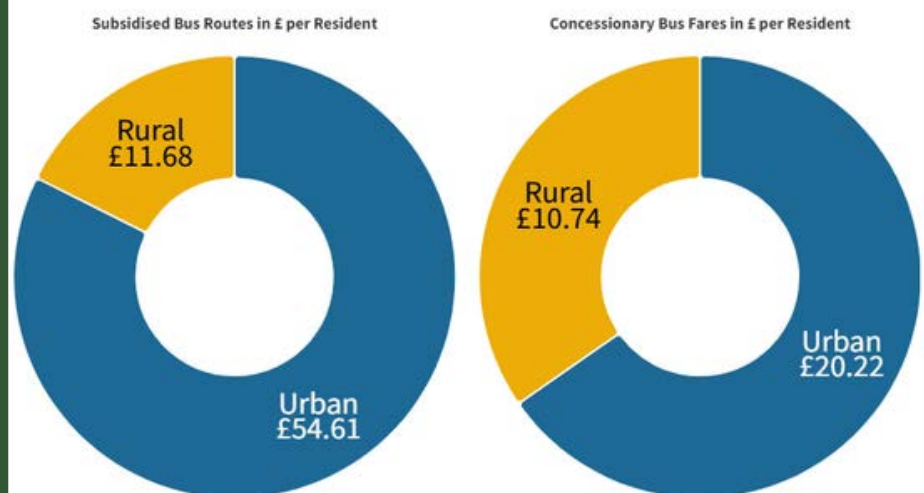
[2] Travel time statistics 2019, Department for Transport

Local authorities in predominantly rural areas have less funding available to them for spending on bus services (than equivalent urban local authorities).[3]

On a like-for-like basis, urban authorities budgeted to spend over 4.6 times more per head on subsidised bus routes than rural.

[3] Analysis of Local Authority Revenue Account Budget data set, RSN (2023).

**Budgeted Local Authority Expenditure per Resident on Bus Service Provision 2023/2024**



# RURAL RESEARCH

In 2023 passengers made 204 million journeys by local bus in predominantly rural areas of England. This was a recovery from the 83 million journeys made during 2020/21, when the pandemic was at its peak. It was still, however, considerably below pre-pandemic levels, when 246 million journeys were made in 2019/20.[1]



Over the decade from 2013 to 2023 bus vehicle mileage in predominantly rural areas declined somewhat for commercially run services (-19%) but almost halved for local authority subsidised services (-47%).[2] This difference may, in part, be due to operators taking a commercial risk to maintain a service where the subsidy is withdrawn.

[1] Bus Statistics, Department for Transport (2023)  
[2] Public Service Vehicle Survey, Department for Transport (2023)

Research suggests that about one in four bus routes have ceased in county and rural areas over the eleven years from 2010/11 to 2021/22.[1] This estimate aligns with findings from another recent study, which adds that prior to the pandemic bus route cuts had mostly impacted subsidised services, but the arrival of the pandemic (in 2020/21) had its largest impact on commercially run services.[2]

A survey of (mainly female) rural residents by the National Federation of Women's Institutes explored the effect of these trends on communities, finding that[3]

[3] A New Route for Local Bus Services, National Federation of Women's Institutes (2021)

18%

said they had access to a frequent and reliable bus service.

Those who said their local bus service had been reduced in the last three years.

44%

38%

said they do not use the bus due to a lack of services.

Another recent survey of rural County and Unitary councils has concluded three-quarters of them are introducing demand-responsive transport (DRT) services, which users can book.[4] This is to plug some gaps left by cuts to traditional bus services. However, almost all (95%) of these DRT services require public subsidy and local authorities do not generally see them as a long-term substitute for bus services. Historically, DRT services have rather provided complimentary services to reach communities off bus routes.

That same survey found that 75% of rural County and Unitary councils in England are currently supporting DRT services to operate in their areas.

[4] Three in four rural authorities roll out demand-responsive transport ..., County Councils Network (2023)

# SPECIFIC POLICY ASKS IN THE ROADMAP TO RURAL SUCCESS: RURAL TRANSPORT

Calls for the first 18 months of the next General Election

Calls for the first 3 years of the next General Election

## DELIVER

Develop an evidence-based Future of Rural Mobility Strategy that acknowledges that buses are essential infrastructure and places a duty on (and allocates funding to) Local Authorities to determine their local need for socially necessary rural buses.



## PROTECT

Protect Community transport by creating a larger funding pot which is sustained over a longer period. It should promote the use of community transport schemes which serve outlying settlements and feed into bus or rail routes.



## ENSURE

Ensure funding for the Rural Fuel Duty Relief Scheme and the Rural Mobility Fund (without a bidding process) to deliver equality of access. Ensure local authorities are fairly funded to maintain vital rural road infrastructure.

## ADDRESS

Address the gaps in the National Bus Strategy by producing a Rural Bus Strategy, objectives for rural provision, with funded actions to better serve rural communities and their economic needs on a sustainable basis.



## CREATE

Create a greener future by undertaking a comprehensive review of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address the risk that the high costs of introducing electric or hydrogen buses and their fuelling facilities could prove problematic in rural areas.

## DEVELOP

Develop and strengthen the power of Local Authorities to deliver these services by ensuring predominantly rural Local Authorities regain and sustain their ability to offer necessary revenue support.



## SUPPORT FOR THE ABOVE CALLS

### ZERO EMISSION BUSES

As described in the section on Net Zero, the high costs of introducing electric or hydrogen buses and their fuelling facilities could prove problematic in rural areas. A comprehensive review is needed of the electric grid and, where appropriate, hydrogen supply, to address this risk.

### COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

The Rural Mobility Fund is useful, if modest in its scale. Lessons from that Fund's current round should form the basis for a larger funding pot which is sustained over a longer period. It should, especially, promote the use of community and demand-responsive transport schemes which serve outlying settlements and feed into bus or rail routes. App-based journey planners and booking technologies should be piloted to attract new users, as should through ticketing between transport providers. However, in many rural areas this may require improvements to mobile connectivity.

### CYCLING AND WALKING

Government should recognise the potential to improve cycling and walking infrastructure in rural towns, to nearby villages and in urban fringe areas. This can reduce car dependency and improve access to rural employment, services, and retail centres. Funding streams being made available to develop such infrastructure must reach rural areas and not simply focus on larger urban settlements. The condition of rural roads needs addressing as it can be a barrier to cycling.





# POLICY SOLUTIONS



## RURAL TRANSPORT ISSUES

The paucity of rural transport options is an issue which strikes at the heart of rural disadvantage, impacting people's access to employment, education and training, health, shops, and a host of other activities. It is a key driver of rural isolation and loneliness. It leaves rural communities highly car dependent, with consequences for the environment and national efforts to reach net zero (for carbon). This situation reflects a long-term lack of strategic policy thinking about what transport provision is needed and appropriate in rural areas.

## DEMAND RESPONSIVE TRANSPORT



This can be a lifeline for rural communities not properly served by 'regular' bus services. They should be developed much further in rural areas. This cannot just be a service provided by volunteers. Such services should be subsidised, and the government funding received by rural councils increased to include this provision. Concessionary Fare passes should be eligible on such services. Concessionary travel under the statutory scheme cannot be used before 9.30 am on weekdays – therefore is of no benefit to older workers who need to be at work before 9.30 am.



## PUBLIC TRANSPORT AVAILABILITY

Evening and weekend transport options are essential. This ensures residents can participate in after-hours activities, access services that aren't available during standard working hours, and maintain social connections, which are fundamental to the quality of life in rural communities

## ACTIVE TRAVEL



Active Travel (which supports making walking, wheeling, and cycling the preferred for everyone to get around) is championed by Active Travel England – a Government Executive Agency. Has its challenges in rural areas. Narrow country lanes and the poor state of the roads can make walking, wheeling, or cycling more dangerous. It should nevertheless be considered when new developments are being planned to serve rural areas.

## ELECTRIC VEHICLES AND CHARGING INFRASTRUCTURE



We cover issues relating to Electric Vehicles/EV charging points in the Chapter relating to Net Zero. Figures for January 2023 show that there were 5,561 public charging points for electric vehicles available in predominantly rural areas of England. Despite an expanding network, this was less than half the number in Greater London (11,521).



# FURTHER READING & USEFUL LINKS



**Every village, every hour 2021 buses report by CPRE, The Countryside Charity.**

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/every-village-every-hour-2021-buses-report-full-report>

**Demand responsive transport survey published by the County Councils.**

<https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/three-in-four-rural-authorities-roll-out-new-demand-responsive-transport-but-warn-that-they-are-not-a-substitute-for-traditional-bus-services>





The Rural Services Network produces rural lens reviews on government papers covering a wide range of topics, see: [www.rsnonline.org.uk/tag/rural-lens](https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/tag/rural-lens) for a comprehensive list of reviews. The Rural Lens reviews below are particularly relevant to **Rural Transport**:

**Bus Back Better, National Bus Strategy.**

<https://www.rsnonline.org.uk/bus-back-better-rural-lens>

**Rural Services Network response to Government Consultations.**

<https://rsnonline.org.uk/images/manifesto-2023/further-reading-documents/transport/rsn-response-to-future-of-transport-rural-strategy-call-for-evidence.pdf>

# Find out more about the Winning the Rural Vote Campaign, click the logos for more details.



Think before you print. Document published 12.04.2024 and subject to regular updates, check our website for the latest version.



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