

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE: BUS SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

Westminster Hall, Sarah Dyke MP

Wednesday 11 September 2024

---

- **Public transport is a lifeline for rural communities and those on low incomes that would otherwise be left isolated and cut off from vital services. An extensive, reliable public transport network is essential to connect the countryside to centres of population and economic activity.**
- **Government statistics, as well as research from the Countryside Alliance, the Community Councils Network and others, have demonstrated that rural bus services have declined throughout recent years, while the impact on rural populations has been on the increase. Interventions from central government to arrest this decline have proven inadequate.**
- **The paucity of viable options for public transport in rural areas, including of bus services, results in a greater dependency on private transport, and this comes at a disproportionately high cost to rural dwellers.**
- **Creating a fair deal for the countryside, connecting it fully to the modern United Kingdom, is a critical challenge facing the new government.**

### Background

- Combined with Government statistics, research from the Community Councils Network (CCN) published in July 2023<sup>1</sup> has demonstrated the scale of the decline that rural bus services have experienced in recent years.
- The CCN found that more than one in every four bus services had vanished in county areas over the past decade, as measured by vehicle miles. Between 2010-22, vehicle miles had reduced by 26.5% in these areas, a higher rate of decline than in London or the metropolitan borough council areas that cover cities and large towns.
- Its study laid part of the blame on the apportionment of Bus Service Improvement Plan funding under the last government's National Bus Strategy, published in 2021. It found that two thirds of the funding went to urban areas, despite these areas having seen lower declines in passenger numbers than rural areas. County areas that received no funding from the first round of funding (but £40m in the second round) witnessed the biggest decline in passenger numbers, a fall of 16%.
- Its analysis also found that councils in rural and county areas were experiencing a £420 million shortfall in their transport budgets, impacting their ability to subsidise the continued operation of routes regarded as commercially unviable. As a result, the number of council-

---

<sup>1</sup> Community Councils Network, [Rural bus services at a 'historic low', as new report reveals urban locations received two-thirds of flagship government funding](#), 19.07.23

supported bus miles had fallen by nearly 60%, from 140 million miles a year in 2010 to 58 million miles in 2022.

- The CCN therefore recommended that the government create a ‘County Bus Strategy’ to address the specific issues in those areas.
- The Department for Transport’s annual bus statistics, last published in March 2024 covering the period up to the year ending March 2023, demonstrate a decline in rural bus usage. The following table indicates the figures (in millions of bus journeys taken in England) for the relevant area types in each of the previous ten years.<sup>2</sup>

<b>Year</b>	<b>Urban with Significant Rural</b>	<b>Largely or Mainly Rural</b>
2013	389	284
2014	396	289
2015	387	286
2016	380	276
2017	368	268
2018	353	257
2019	346	259
2020	318	246
2021	106	83
2022	213	172
2023	250	204

- The figures indicate that the number of rural bus journeys had been in relatively minor decline until the coronavirus pandemic, but by March 2023 they remained well below pre-pandemic levels.

### **Broader issues in rural transport**

- Declines in rural bus use cannot reasonably be attributed to a lack of demand for transport and travel. On the contrary, Defra’s latest Statistical Digest of Rural England on Connectivity and Accessibility state that people living in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings travelled further and for longer in 2021 compared with any other settlement type.
- According to the figures, in 2021, each resident travelled 6,450 miles on average; this is 2,000 miles more per person than those living in urban city and town areas (4,460 miles) and 2,800 miles more per person than those living in urban conurbations (3,660 miles).<sup>3</sup>
- Instead, the paucity of viable options for public transport in rural areas, including of bus services, results in a greater dependency on private transport, and this comes at a disproportionately high cost to rural dwellers.

<sup>2</sup> DfT, Bus statistics data tables, [BUS01: Local bus passenger journeys](#), 12.06.24

<sup>3</sup> Defra, [Statistical Digest of Rural England: 5 – Connectivity and Accessibility](#), 06.24

- Countryside Alliance research from 2022 found that rural households were spending almost £800 a year more on fuel than people who live in urban areas, and up to 6 pence per litre more for petrol.<sup>4</sup>
- This research was cited in the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse's April 2023 report as an example of the 'rural premium': the added costs people face simply for living in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>
- Lack of access to transport also impacts levels of isolation experienced in rural areas especially among older residents and those with no, or limited access, to private transport. It also makes accessing services harder, including access to health services.

### **Countryside Alliance position**

- In our Rural Charter, a manifesto published ahead of the general election, we argued:

*“As the anchors for key industries including food production, tourism and hospitality, rural communities are a cornerstone of our country's way of life. Yet in too many ways they are being left behind. Creating a fair deal for the countryside, connecting it fully to the modern United Kingdom, is a critical challenge facing the next government.”<sup>6</sup>*

- Public transport is a lifeline for rural communities and those on low incomes that would otherwise be left isolated and cut off from vital services. An extensive, reliable public transport network is essential to connect the countryside to centres of population and economic activity.

### **For more information please contact:**

**Sarah Lee**

Director of Policy

[sarah-lee@countryside-alliance.org](mailto:sarah-lee@countryside-alliance.org)

**David M Bean**

Parliament & Government Relations Manager

[David-Bean@countryside-alliance.org](mailto:David-Bean@countryside-alliance.org)

---

<sup>4</sup> Countryside Alliance, [Parliamentary group highlights 'rural premium'](#), 28.04.23

<sup>5</sup> APPG for Rural Business and the Rural Powerhouse, [THE RURAL PREMIUM: exploring the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in rural areas](#)

<sup>6</sup> Countryside Alliance, [Rural Charter: Championing our Countryside](#), 2024