

Debate Pack

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Decarbonising Rural Transport

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1 Background

A Backbench Business Committee debate on decarbonising rural transport is scheduled to be held on 7 March 2023 at 9:30am in Westminster Hall. The debate that will be opened by Selaine Saxby MP.

The overall strategy for transport decarbonisation is contained in the Transport Decarbonisation Plan (TDP), published in July 2021. The plan contained a number of commitments for decarbonising all forms of transport, including delivering:

- A world class cycling and walking network in England by 2020.
- The National Bus Strategy’s vision of a transformed bus industry and a green bus revolution.
- A zero emissions fleet of cars, vans, motorcycles, and e-scooters.¹

This plan applies to England only, with the Scottish Government, Welsh Government, and Northern Ireland Executive responsible for decarbonisation as a devolved issue.

The TDP did not cover decarbonisation of rural transport specifically, but instead commits to support that will be provided for decarbonisation innovation through the ‘Future of Transport: Rural Strategy’ (described below).

The TDP highlighted the issue that people living in rural areas require different solutions and that research has shown that they are less receptive to exploring non-car travel modes.² This makes the uptake of electric vehicles, active travel and public transport particularly important issues for decarbonisation in rural areas and are discussed below.

1.1 Overview of rural transport policy

Future of Transport: Rural Strategy

In November 2020 the Department for Transport (DfT) launched a call for evidence on the [Future of Transport: rural strategy](#).³ It stated that the opportunities from innovation could be different in rural areas, which may necessitate a different approach to that taken in urban areas, recognising the

¹ DfT, [Transport Decarbonisation Plan](#), July 2021

² DfT, [Transport Decarbonisation Plan](#), July 2021, p194

³ DfT, [Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence](#), November 2020

different population structures, travelling patterns and geography with the following important features:

- People living in rural areas are, on average, older
- In rural areas, cars are used more often and for longer trips than in urban areas
- Active travel is more common in urban areas than rural
- Aspects of geography, such as islands or mountainous terrain can limit the number of routes in and out of some rural areas.

The call for evidence suggested developments needed for innovation in rural transport. This included:

- Increased use of active transport modes, which focussed on the uptake of e-bikes and digital mapping
- Micro-mobility e.g., e-scooters and e-cargo bikes.
- More effective integration of journeys, linking different services to create a more seamless experience and the use of digital platforms for planning, booking, and paying for travel.
- Innovative infrastructure to support the linking of services such as mobility hubs (co-locating different modes and services together) and meeting the demand for EV charging.
- Digital-enabled models of transport provision, including demand responsive transport (DRT).
- New modes, such as drone delivery.
- Fostering rural community identity including home-working and home-based businesses.⁴

A summary of responses to the call for evidence was published in September 2021. It stated that the most frequently raised issue was the level of car dependence being too high in rural areas and a high number of respondents identified the lack of transport options in rural villages and towns being an important cause of social isolation. Many respondents commented that unless the Government acts to shape how innovation takes place, rural areas will be left behind, with a call for proactive Government intervention through the range of levers available, such as regulation, funding and setting out a clear strategic vision.⁵

⁴ DfT, [Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence](#), November 2020

⁵ DfT, [Future of Transport: rural strategy: call for evidence: summary of responses](#), September 2021

The Government is still analysing feedback from this call for evidence. In response to a PQ on 9 February 2023 on maintaining rural bus routes, Transport Minister Richard Holden stated that the strategy will be published soon.⁶

Reports on rural transport decarbonisation

In September 2021, the County Councils Network (CCN) published the report [Rising to the Climate Challenge: The Role of Counties in Delivering Net-Zero](#). The report highlighted that crucial to the successful role out of climate change action is the need to recognise that not all places are the same, with CCN authorities facing more varied challenges in rural areas which has resulted in slower emissions reductions than other urban and city areas. The report stated that it is transport emissions where the slowest progress has been made, with a 4.7% reduction between 2005 and 2018. This compared to a 10.2% decrease for metropolitan boroughs, a 16.2% decrease for core cities, and a 22.9% decrease for London councils.⁷

Similarly, a report from the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport published in May 2021 on [The Challenge of future carbon and emissions reduction for rural communities](#) proposed that a one-size-fits-all approach to decarbonising transport would not achieve the desired outcome of decarbonisation. It stated that the Government's Road to Zero industrial strategy is "urban-centric and does not reflect adequately the different needs across the UK".⁸

1.2

Electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure and investment

The Library Briefing, [Electric vehicles and infrastructure](#) gives a background to issues surrounding the uptake of EV infrastructure.⁹ In the Government's [Future of Transport: rural strategy call for evidence](#), it stated that there is an expectation of a significant increase in demand for charging infrastructure for EVs, although rural communities will have unique and different EV infrastructure needs compared with urban areas. It added that addressing these needs would be a crucial part of the Government's strategy for EV charging infrastructure.¹⁰

⁶ PQ 139198 [[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)]

⁷ County Councils Network, [Rising to the Climate Challenge: The Role of Counties in Delivering Net-Zero](#), 15 September 2021

⁸ Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, [The Challenge of future carbon and emissions reduction for rural communities](#), May 2021

⁹ Commons Library briefing CBP-7480, [Electric vehicles and infrastructure](#)

¹⁰ DfT, [Future of Transport: rural strategy – call for evidence](#), November 2020

In the summary of responses to the call for evidence, many respondents said that while EVs were becoming more popular in towns and villages, some felt EVs were less visible owing to fewer chargepoints available for EVs in rural areas.¹¹

In July 2021, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published the report [Building a comprehensive and competitive electric vehicle charging sector that works for all drivers](#). The report highlighted the potential risk of ‘charging deserts’ with remote locations, like rural areas, lacking the business case for commercial investment in rapid en-route charging. The CMA recommend that governments consider targeting funding gaps in areas which may not otherwise be served.¹²

Government’s electric charging strategy

In the Government’s [Taking Charge: the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy](#), published in July 2022, it is stated that there is an expectation that chargepoints will ultimately be commercially attractive in a mix of rural and urban areas.¹³ The Government acknowledged that poor grid connectivity may also be an issue in remote areas.¹⁴ There are no specific policies directed at rollout of chargers in rural areas, with public charging provision primarily left to the private sector to decide on chargepoint locations. However, £500m is being invested through the Local EV Infrastructure (LEVI) fund, with £50m of this earmarked for supporting local authorities to work out their specific local challenges and plan accordingly.¹⁵

The CCN have raised concerns that if the roll-out of EV infrastructure is left in the hands of private companies there could be a delay in the roll-out of infrastructure in more rural CNN member authorities, if such investment is not viewed as attractive. They compare this to a similar situation with rural broadband, where rural communities have been left behind (more information is available in Library briefing [Gigabit-broadband: Funding for rural and hard to reach areas](#)¹⁶). They state there is a situation where the attitudes to EVs in rural areas are less positive, driven by the need for cars as a more viable and reliable mode of transport, and charging anxiety with lower numbers of chargepoints in these areas.¹⁷

A 2022 report by Ricardo (an environment and engineering consultancy) for the Climate Change Committee also brings up the issue of investment in rural

¹¹ DfT, [Future of Transport: rural strategy: call for evidence: summary of responses](#), September 2021

¹² CMA, [Building a comprehensive and competitive electric vehicle charging sector that works for all drivers](#), 23 July 2021

¹³ DfT, [Taking Charge: the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy](#), 25 March 2022, p 46

¹⁴ DfT, [Taking Charge: the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy](#), 25 March 2022, p 47

¹⁵ DfT, [Taking Charge: the electric vehicle infrastructure strategy](#), 25 March 2022

¹⁶ Commons Library Briefings CBP-9207, [Gigabit-broadband: Funding for rural and hard to reach areas](#)

¹⁷ County Councils Network, [Rising to the Climate Challenge: The Role of Counties in Delivering Net-Zero](#), 15 September 2021

charging infrastructure being less attractive for private chargepoint operators as there is a lower uptake of EVs in these areas. Ricardo recommended that central Government should provide areas with low EV uptake with greater support to ensure that no one is left behind, with a particular focus on the rural business case.¹⁸

EV statistics

While many households in rural areas have access to a driveway or garage so could install their own home charge point, around [15% of households](#) in rural areas have on-street parking in England, so would not be able to do so.¹⁹

There is an uneven geographical distribution of charging devices within the UK. Some local authorities have bid for UK Government funding for charging devices, and others have not. Most of the provision of this infrastructure has been market-led, with individual charging networks and other businesses (such as hotels) choosing where to install devices.

The map below shows the number of publicly available electric vehicle charging points of all speeds by local authority in January 2023. From this map, a difference in charging points between rural and urban areas is not obvious, with some more rural local authorities, such as in North Wales, reporting mid-range numbers of charger per 100,000 population.

London and Scotland had the highest level of charging provision per 100,000 of population, with 131 and 69 devices per 100,000 respectively. For comparison, the average provision in the UK was 55 per 100,000.

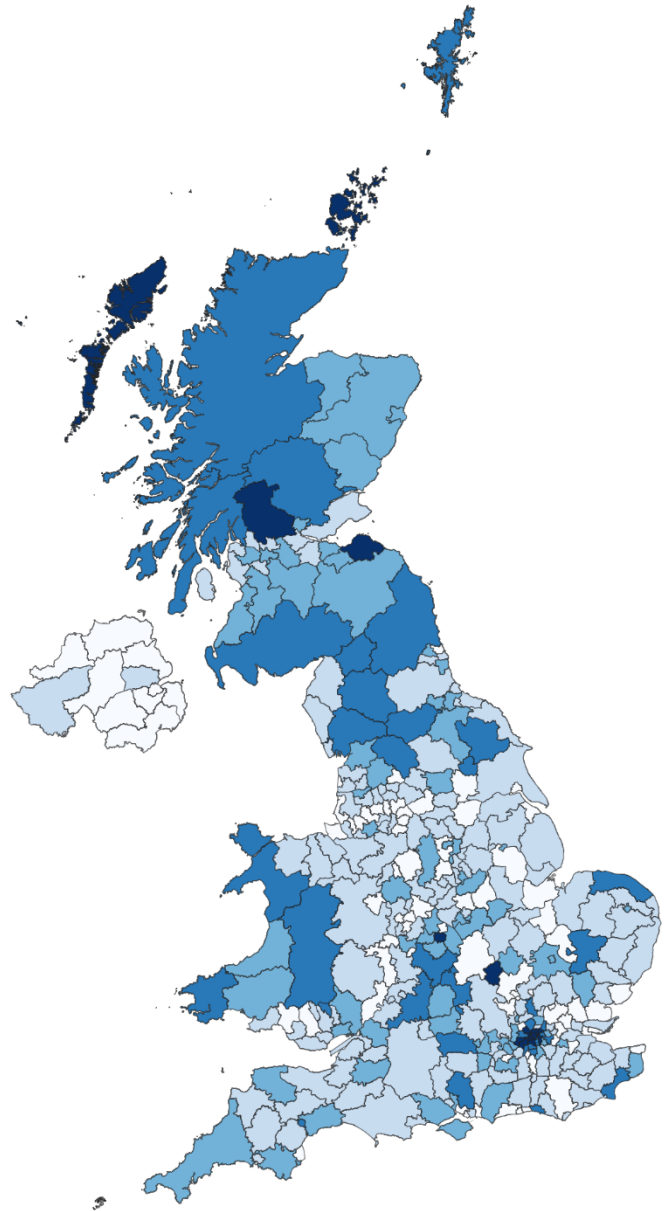
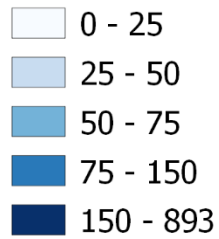
Northern Ireland had the lowest level of charging device provision in the UK, with 19 devices per 100,000 population, followed by the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber with 31 and 36 devices per 100,000 respectively.

Please note that the charging devices are reported per population, rather than per vehicle, so the availability of charging devices might not be representative with the prominence of electric vehicles.

¹⁸ Ricardo for the Climate Change Committee, [Understanding the costs and impacts of potential approaches to providing electric vehicle charging for households without private off-street parking](#), 13 May 2022

¹⁹ DLUHC, [English Housing Survey data on amenities, services and local environments](#), 7 July 2022

Publicly available electric vehicle charging devices at all speeds per 100,000 population in January 2023



Source: DfT, [Electric vehicle charging device statistics](#): January 2023, 25 January 2023

1.3

Active travel infrastructure and uptake

In the Government's 2020 [Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking](#) strategy it acknowledged that there is no "one size fits all" approach to the policy and standards around walking and cycling, with different levels of provision being appropriate for different places, both within and between local authorities. The strategy stated that more will be required from all local authorities, urban and rural, but the main focus is on medium-sized towns, larger towns and cities.²⁰

In the Government's [second cycling and walking investment strategy](#) published in July 2022, it also mentioned that the different needs of urban and rural communities will need consideration. However, there is no further guidance on how this should be done.²¹

The CCN report commented that due to the physical size of CCN member authorities it is difficult to provide a sufficient, universal, and safe alternative of active travel infrastructure, including safe walking and cycling routes between towns and villages, which has had the effect of reliance on private cars. Statistics on the difference in active travel between urban and rural areas are not readily available, however, the CCN did state that only 27% of British cycling takes place in CCN areas.²²

Answering a PQ on 1 July 2022 on how much active travel funding has been awarded to cycling projects in rural areas, the then Transport Minister, Trudy Harrison stated that the Active Travel Fund has supported a wide range of walking and cycling schemes in urban and rural areas, but it is for authorities to determine what schemes to promote and support in their areas. She noted that £35 million has been made available to improve the quality, safety, and accessibility of the National Cycle Network, with much of the network being in rural areas.²³

1.4

Rural public transport provision

The Library briefing, [Buses and Taxis FAQs](#) provides information on bus provision in England.²⁴ In March 2021 the Government published its [Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England](#). It is acknowledged in the strategy

²⁰ DfT, [Gear Change: A bold vision for cycling and walking](#), 27 July 2020

²¹ DfT and Active Travel England, [second cycling and walking investment strategy](#), 6 July 2022

²² County Councils Network, [Rising to the Climate Challenge: The Role of Counties in Delivering Net-Zero](#), 15 September 2021

²³ PQ 4627, [[Cycling and Walking: Rural Areas](#)]

²⁴ Commons Library Briefing CBP-8734, [Buses and Taxis FAQs](#)

that rural areas are more dispersed, with low density populations, making it more of a challenge in providing bus services.

Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs)

BSIPs are one of the most important elements of the strategy, with the expectation that all local transport authorities (LTAs) would publish these by October 2021, before the Government allocated funding to LTAs for the delivery of the plans. The plans should include coverage of the full area of an LTA, taking account of differing parts of that area i.e. ensuring that all areas, including rural and more isolated ones, were included.²⁵

In April 2022 the DfT announced that 79 LTAs submitted BSIPs and 34 of these would receive funding of £1.153bn between them for delivery.²⁶ The Government did not provide an explanation as to why these LTAs were chosen over others. However, the Campaign for Better Transport subsequently provided analysis of these decisions in their report [Funding local bus services in England](#). This analysis showed that LTAs that tended to miss out on the funding were more rural unitaries or larger councils with more dispersed populations and smaller teams dedicated to public transport. The report added that more rural authorities or those with smaller transport teams have continually struggled to apply for and win funding from competitive pots.²⁷

Bus Service operators grant (BSOG)

The Bus Back Better strategy also gave an update on BSOG which is paid to eligible operators on an annual basis to help recover some of their fuel costs and incentive-related payments. The strategy stated that this funding is used to help operators keep fares down and keep services running which might otherwise be unprofitable, particularly in rural areas. The strategy commits to reform of BSOG to better meet Government priorities, which would include an additional amount for rural bus services and more incentives for demand responsive travel. The original commitment was to consult on these reforms in 2021.²⁸ No consultation has been released yet, with Transport Minister Richard Holden stating in an answer to a PQ on 7 February 2023 that DfT will publish the consultation later this year.²⁹

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) claimed the lack of statutory framework and cuts to bus funding by the government over the last decade have left a serious lack of services to meet the needs of rural towns and villages. In their report [Every village, every hour: A comprehensive bus network for rural England](#), published in March 2021, CPRE put forward several

²⁵ DfT, [Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England](#), March 2021, p 41

²⁶ DfT, [Cheaper and better buses in £7 billion package to level up transport outside London](#), 4 April 2022

²⁷ Campaign for Better Transport, [Funding local bus services in England](#), (PDF), June 2022, p10

²⁸ DfT, [Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England](#), March 2021

²⁹ PQ 137828 [[Bus Service Operators Grant](#)]

calls to the Government, including recognising a universal basic right to public transport, backed with statutory duties for local transport authorities to provide legal minimum service frequency standards to villages and towns, according to their size. They also recommended that the Government ensures that the rural public transport network is affordable or free, to put an end to rural transport poverty and to provide an alternative to car use sufficiently attractive to address the climate emergency.³⁰

Demand responsive transport

The other important element in the Bus Back Better strategy intended to support rural bus services is demand responsive travel (DRT). DRT can offer a more personal, on-demand service, taking people closer to their doors than a regular service. Before the strategy's publication the Government had already established a Rural Mobility Fund to trial more DRT services, with funding of £20m for 17 pilot projects.³¹

In DfT's [Demand responsive transport: local authority toolkit](#), it is discussed how DRT can help to reduce CO₂ emissions. This includes:

- Substituting car journeys
- Encouraging active travel, for example by facilitating bikes on board.
- Replacing a fixed route, diesel-fuelled bus service with a more direct route on a vehicle optimised to suit the number of passengers.

The toolkit also discussed funding opportunities for DRT. It stated that most DRT services are currently subsidised by LTAs and that there are currently no central government grants available.³² In answer to a PQ on when the findings of the projects funded by the Rural Mobility Fund would be available, Transport Minister Richard Holden said that interim findings would be published in the first half of 2023, with the final findings in 2025.³³

Bus statistics

The number of passenger journeys on local bus services is lower in rural areas than urban areas. Data from 2019/20 is provided to show trends before the pandemic too.

- In 2021/22, the number of passenger journeys on local bus services in largely or mainly rural areas was 172 million (pre-pandemic, it was 246 million in 2019/20), in urban with significant rural areas it was 213

³⁰ CPRE, [Every village, every hour: A comprehensive bus network for rural England](#), March 2021

³¹ DfT, [Bus Back Better: national bus strategy for England](#), March 2021

³² DfT, [Demand responsive transport: local authority toolkit](#), 13 April 2022

³³ PQ 137839 [[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)]

million (down from 318 million in 2019/20) and in other predominantly urban areas it was 394 million (down from 572 million in 2019/20).³⁴

- The number of passenger journeys per head of population on local bus services was 48 in English metropolitan areas and 22 in English non-metropolitan areas in 2021/22. This is a decrease from 70 and 32 passenger journeys per head of population pre-pandemic in 2019/20.³⁵

The proportion of journeys for concessionary travel in English non-metropolitan areas is lower than in non-metropolitan areas.

- 34.1% (199 million) of total passenger journeys were for concessionary travel (including youth schemes) in English metropolitan areas, compared to 27.9% (217 million) in non-metropolitan areas in 2021/22. This is a decrease from 35.0% (295 million) and 31.5% (358 million) respectively in 2019/20.³⁶

Total vehicle miles on local bus services are higher in urban compared to rural areas. This is partly because approximately 80% of people live in urban areas.

- The vehicle miles on local bus services in largely or mainly rural areas in Great Britain in 2021/22 was 148 million miles. Urban with significant rural areas was 163 million vehicle miles and other predominantly urban areas was 194 million. This is a decrease from 156 million vehicle miles, 184 million vehicle miles and 216 million vehicle miles respectively, pre-pandemic in 2019/20.³⁷

³⁴ DfT, [Local bus passenger journeys \(BUS01a\)](#), 31 January 2023

³⁵ DfT, [Local bus passenger journeys \(BUS01b\)](#), 31 January 2023

³⁶ DfT, [Local bus passenger journeys \(BUS01c\)](#), 31 January 2023

³⁷ DfT, [Local bus passenger journeys \(BUS02a\)](#), 31 January 2023

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Press articles

The following is a selection of news and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[Lanarkshire MSP welcomes UK Government funding for decarbonising roads project](#)

Ross Thompson

Daily Record

29 January 2023

[UK government to invest £30 million into decarbonising roads](#)

Jack Warrick

AutoCar

25 January 2023

[UK to become 'world leader' for net zero projects to decarbonise highways](#)

Felix Reeves

Express

25 January 2023

[Plans to create transport network in the south east revealed](#)

Katie Boyden

Evening Standard

23 June 2022

[West Midlands to launch UK's largest hydrogen bus fleet after securing £30m Government funding](#)

Lisa O'Brien

28 March 2022

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Parliamentary material

Parliamentary Questions

[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)

3 February 2023 | UIN139198

Asked by: Rachel Maskell

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what steps he is taking to help maintain bus route provision in rural areas.

Answering member: Richard Holden | Department for Transport

The Government has provided nearly £2 billion of support since March 2020 through emergency and recovery grants to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on the bus sector. This includes a six-month extension to the Bus Recovery Grant to provide up to £130 million to continue supporting bus services in England outside London until the end of March of this year. The Department for Transport is actively considering its support for the bus sector from April 2023.

The Government is also providing £60 million to help bus operators cap single fares at £2 on services in England outside London from 1 January to 31 March 2023. Over 140 operators covering more than 4,600 routes throughout England are participating in the scheme, including in rural areas, which will help increase patronage on buses and help millions save on their regular travel costs.

Our £20 million Rural Mobility Fund (RMF) is supporting 16 innovative, demand-led minibus trials in rural and suburban areas across 15 local authorities in England. These pilots are exploring whether Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) can serve these communities more effectively than traditional public transport solutions alone.

We have engaged extensively with rural stakeholders on how new transport modes can benefit rural communities in developing the soon to be published Future of Transport: Rural Strategy.

[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)

1 February 2023 | UIN137830

Asked by: Iain Stewart

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, for how long each Rural Mobility Fund demand responsive transport pilot will last; when (a) interim and (b)

final findings from these pilots will be published; and what form those findings will take.

Answering member: Richard Holden | Department for Transport

The Rural Mobility Fund demand responsive transport pilots are planned to last between two and five years from the point of launch. They have all launched at different times, influenced by multiple factors such as vehicle availability and resourcing, so the end of each trial period may vary from the original timeframes envisaged.

We expect to publish interim findings in the first half of 2023, further findings in late 2023/early 2024, and the final findings in 2025 in the form of written reports. However, the exact timings and dissemination approach will be determined closer to the time.

[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)

6 January 2023 | UIN117982

Asked by: Helen Morgan

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, whether his Department has taken recent steps to help ensure that there is adequate bus service provision in rural areas.

Answering member: Richard Holden | Department for Transport

The Government recognises the importance of transport provision in rural areas. England's long-term National Bus Strategy, "Bus Back Better", was published in March 2021, setting out a bold vision for bus services across the country.

The Strategy asked all English Local Transport Authorities (LTAs) outside London to publish Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs). It asked for BSIPs to be developed in collaboration with local bus operators and cover the LTA's full area, all local bus services within it, and the differing needs of any parts of that area, such as rural elements. The Strategy also encouraged new forms of bus provision in areas that are currently not adequately served by conventional timetabled buses.

To support Local Transport Authorities to improve bus services in their areas, we are providing over £1 billion of new money to make bus services more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper. We are also providing practical assistance, including allocating a named Relationship Manager to all LTAs.

Our £20 million Rural Mobility Fund is supporting 17 innovative, demand-led minibus trials in rural and suburban areas across 15 local authorities in

England. The experience gained from these pilots will help LTAs better understand how Demand Responsive Transport might best operate.

In addition, the Government is also providing £60 million to help bus operators cap single fares at £2 on services in England outside London from 1 January to 31 March 2023. Over 130 operators covering more than 4,600 routes throughout England are participating in the scheme, including in rural areas, which will help increase patronage on buses and help millions save on their regular travel costs.

[Bus Services: Rural Areas](#)

28 November 2022 | UIN97688

Asked by: Richard Foord

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what assessment he has made of the impact of inflation on rural bus services.

Answering member: Richard Holden | Department for Transport

The Government recognises the importance of transport for rural areas and is committed to improving access to services that provide vital connectivity. The Government pays almost £260 million per year in Bus Service Operators Grant, which benefits passengers by helping operators keep fares down, and enabling operators to run services that might otherwise be unprofitable and could lead to cancellation.

The Government has also provided nearly £2 billion in emergency and recovery funding to local transport authorities and bus operators since March 2020 to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic on bus services and protect local bus routes. This includes an additional £130 million to continue support services until March 2023.

The Government does recognise that inflationary pressures, including rising fuel costs, are impacting operating costs of bus services across England. Recovery funding provided to LTAs from April this year has accounted for forecast inflationary increases.

[Cycling: Rural Areas](#)

22 June 2022 | UIN23437

Asked by: James Wild

To ask the Secretary of State for Transport, what proportion of funding issued under the Active Travel programme has been awarded to cycling projects in rural areas.

Answering member: Trudy Harrison | Department for Transport

The Active Travel Fund has supported a wide range of walking and cycling schemes in both urban and rural areas in the last two financial years. It is for authorities to determine what schemes to promote and support in their areas. Allocations to local authorities have been published at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-active-travel-fund-local-transport-authority-allocations/emergency-active-travel-fund-total-indicative-allocations>(opens in a new tab).

The Department announced another £200 million of funding for active travel schemes on 14 May 2022, which included £35 million to improve the quality, safety and accessibility of the National Cycle Network. Much of this network is in rural areas.

Debate

[Zero-emission Buses](#)

Tuesday 5 July 2022 | House of Commons | Volume 717

[Transport Decarbonisation](#)

Wednesday 14 July 2021 | House of Commons | Volume 699

[Transport Decarbonisation Plan](#)

Wednesday 16 June 2021 | House of Commons | Volume 697

[Net Zero Targets and Decarbonising Transport](#)

Tuesday 4 February 2020 | House of Commons | Volume 671

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Further reading

- Commons Library Briefing CBP-8734 [Buses and Taxis FAQs](#) 13 January 2023
- Commons Library Briefing CBP-7480 [Electric vehicles and infrastructure](#) 21 February 2023
- Commons Library Briefing CBP-9464 [The National Bus Strategy: Bus policy in England outside London](#) 17 May 2022
- Commons Library Briefing CBP-8590 [Net zero in the UK](#) 16 December 2019

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